

a prayer for which no words exist by celoica

Series: [perfect places \[1\]](#)

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Summary:

"There's blood on your face," Steve said numbly. He touched his own mouth. His fingers came back dark and slick with blood.

Billy threw back his head and laughed. Red stained his teeth. "You gonna still kiss me, darling?"

(Or: The one where Steve and Billy find something in each other they couldn't find in anyone else.)

1. Chapter 1

Notes for the Chapter:

Billy is seventeen for most of this fic, hence the underage warning.

I've always been a fly by the seat of my pants kinda girl, so expect updated tags and warnings as we go. Weekly updates will be on Wednesdays.

Deeply inspired by paragraph 24 of *You Are Jeff* by Richard Siken.

January 19, 1985

In a small town like Hawkins, everyone knew everyone—and everyone knew everyone else's business.

Or, at least, they liked to think they did.

Melinda and Greg who owned the coin-operated laundromat on Habersham were always fighting about money. Everyone knew this because Sarah Colburne, one of the waitresses at the greasy spoon next door loved to spill the beans while she was topping up your morning coffee. Hilary, one of the other waitresses, would drop an unkind word about how Sarah shouldn't be talking about other people's money business when she had asked for an advancement on her last pay cheque along with your plate of eggs and bacon. Father Bryant would turn in his seat and tell Hilary that she shouldn't speak ill of those in need, and then in the same breath say, "I heard her husband has been gambling again."

The convoluted game of telephone tag left Melinda with the gambling problem and Hilary on the cusp of divorcing her own husband.

Steve didn't put too much stock in what anyone said anymore. After the Upside Down, he didn't believe anything was true without seeing it with his own two eyes.

"You know what I heard?" Sarah said as she filled his mug to the brim, snapping bright pink bubblegum around a sly smile. "The Chief had to go out to the Hargrove's last night. Was a whole big ruckus going on in the front yard. The neighbours had to call the cops."

"Oh?" Steve said, glancing up from his chemistry paper. It was due first period. It would get him a solid B- if he were lucky. These days it didn't seem he was that lucky.

Sarah nodded, setting the pot down. "Uh-huh. Susan—not the neighbour beside them, but the one three doors down—came in here this morning all in a tizzy. Said she didn't get any sleep last night because they were up all night over there screamin' and yellin'."

Steve looked down at his coffee, at the eraser marks on his homework, at his own chicken-scratched name in the right corner. Billy wasn't on his radar, or maybe he was the one who wasn't on Billy's. He hadn't been since he'd beat the snot out of Steve and been scared by his own baby sister. Steve saw him around when he picked up Will for Nancy from the Byers' house, usually skulking in the front seat of his noisy car, head dipped low and cigarette hanging out of his mouth while he waited for Max. He didn't go to the door anymore. Steve hadn't asked why.

"That's...different," Steve said, going for casual and missing by a mile. The last time he'd seen Billy had been three days before. He'd been leaning up against his car, hip jutting out in a way that made his jeans look even tighter, running his fingertips over Brenda The Junior's arm. They'd made eye contact for three seconds. Billy had been the one to look away.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "Did she say what happened?"

Sarah shook her head and popped her gum. "No-o-ope. Just said that Hargrove boy was screechin' up a storm."

Taking a sip of coffee so thick he could chew it, Steve hummed appropriately and let Sarah go on about what Susan had said. By the time he tossed down a few bills to pay for his breakfast, he learned nothing new—only that Susan who lived three doors down had been wearing pearls on a Thursday morning and wasn't that just so

unusual, and Billy Hargrove had not changed at all.

Winter had come crashing in November as usual, leaving a thick blanket of white across Hawkins that had only accumulated since Christmas. Mounds of snow piled up in the corners of the parking lot, middle schoolers crawling up the sides and tossing snowballs overhead at each other.

Steve stepped out of his car, nudging the door closed with his hip as he balanced his textbooks on one hand. The chilly January air bit at his bare cheeks and fingertips. He locked the door, scanning across the parking lot for Nancy's curly hair and Jonathan's Ford. Spotting Jonathan a few lanes over, he tucked his books under his arm and jogged toward them.

"Hey," he said, settling in beside Nancy. She smiled at him, head tipping up and squinting past the brightness of the sun.

"Hey, you." She nudged him with her shoulder.

A few months ago, he would have slung his arms around her, settled his chin on her shoulder and kissed her neck. His hands would have smoothed down her thighs until she squeaked and pressed back against him. He would have kissed her mouth and called her beautiful.

Jonathan Byers' fingers threaded through Nancy's. Steve smiled at him.

"Hey, man," he said, shifting his books underneath his other arm. What he meant to ask next was *how was your weekend* and *did I tell you about the party Dustin wants to crash*. Instead what came out was, "Did Max say anything to Will or Mike about Billy?"

Jonathan squinted at him. "Billy Hargrove?"

"Yeah."

"Is he bothering Lucas again?" Nancy asked. Her fingers tightened in Jonathan's.

"I don't think so. Sarah told me Hopper was out at their place last night."

Nancy's hand relaxed. "Mike didn't say anything to me." She looked to Jonathan, who just shrugged. Steve took it as a no.

"It's probably nothing."

"It's probably Billy being Billy."

"He punched Reed in the face at practice last week," Nancy added, as if it explained it all. In a way, it did.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." He plastered a grin on his face. "You guys coming to Dungeons & Dragons night this Friday?"

Nancy barely hid her disdain. Jonathan laughed. When the bell rang, they filed inside and parted ways.

Later, during third period, when Mr Douglas ran out of chalk and sent Steve to the office to collect more, Steve spotted Neil Hargrove stepping into the principal's office.

He knew who Neil Hargrove was because this was Hawkins, where everyone knew everyone, and because he'd seen Neil pick up Max a time or two from the Wheelers house. Over Christmas break he'd spotted Neil, his wife and Max at church, where all the other good Catholics in town went on Christmas Eve. Billy hadn't been with them.

A bruise, blooming purple and tinged yellow around the edges, stained Neil's cheekbone. Steve stared for a beat too long before jerking his eyes away, muttering a thanks to the office aid and ducking out of the office.

Steve hid behind a wall outside the office until Neil Hargrove left, fingers curled around the pack of chalk in his hand.

A note was stuck to the fridge along with a twenty dollar bill.

Your dad surprised me with a trip to Indianapolis for the week. We'll be at the Palmer House. I'll call you at five.

Steve tore down the note and tossed it in the trash. He pocketed the money, picked out one of his father's German imported beers from the fridge, flopped onto the couch and flipped on the TV.

Five came and went, along with two more beers and leftover lasagna. At eight-thirty, Steve put on his coat and left the house.

It hadn't always been suffocating in his house. There had been a time before when he had rejoiced in being left alone, in being considered trustworthy enough not to burn the house down while his parents fucked off to whatever show or concert or weekend-turned-entire-week getaway they were obsessed with lately. They always left the house fully stocked. If his parents weren't around, there were a dozen people willing to fill up the empty space they left.

If it wasn't Tommy and Carol, it was Amy or Laurie, or Becky. It was whoever could hitch a ride to his place on a Friday night to drink and dance and mess around. It was Nancy. It was whoever wanted to spend the evening with King Steve Harrington, and that was everyone.

But that was before. Before the Demo-dogs and the Mind Flayer. Before Steve knew that government conspiracies were real and that little girls were weapons stronger than the atomic bomb. Before everything Steve had ever known had been yanked out from under him.

After that first night in the Byers' house, he'd thought he'd seen it all. *That* had been the worst thing to ever happen to him. Barb's death, Will disappearing, facing off with what looked like the Venus-flytrap from Hell—all of it was the worst thing that would ever happen to Steve. He'd barely been a participant, but it had been enough to leave him in nightmares, gripped by the night chills and the taste of bile in his mouth in the morning.

There had been no nightmares when the Mind Flayer had been stopped. Steve had crawled into bed and slept for twelve hours. He'd gone to school the next day, went to class and turned in his

assignments. He'd worked on college essays and argued with his parents.

The nightmares had rolled in just before Christmas, gnarled and twisted things that sat heavy in his chest long after he woke. The shadows that followed him at night looked so much like the ones that crept along the walls of his empty house in the early morning light. When the wind howled and whistled outside, the snapping, Venus-jowls of the Demo-dogs howled with it.

Sometimes, buried underneath a mountain of blankets, Steve could feel the overbearing presence of the Upside Down creeping into his bedroom, slipping up to the ceiling and swallowing him whole.

Steve jammed a slightly bent cigarette between his lips, fiddling with the wheel of his lighter. He struck it twice before the cigarette lit up. He inhaled, holding it for a beat too long, before releasing it out into the bitter air. He shoved his hands in his pockets, half-curved into fists, and trudged down the sidewalk, kicking a path of snow out of the way to lead him back home.

Walking helped. Walking cleared his head, in the same way the *slap-slap-slap* of a basketball on the court cleared his head, in the same way running at five-thirty in the morning cleared his head. The cold bit at his skin, chilling him under his jacket and leaving his fingertips numb, but left him mind blissfully blank, a low-grade white noise buzzing in the background like whatever latest tunes were playing on the radio while he did homework.

Even getting high and jerking off in bed didn't have the same affect on him anymore. Walking in the cold air was like a balm to his soul, soothing it in ways nothing else could.

Cutting a path through the house on the end of Cornwallis that had foreclosed six months before, Steve buried himself in the quiet of Hawkins after dark. Wrapped up in the sound of snow shuffling beneath his boots and the flutter of the flickering streetlamp overhead, he almost missed the Camaro parked on Belmont.

He slowed to a stop, pulling the cigarette from his mouth. There were exactly three people in Hawkins who owned a Camaro, and only one

who owned one that looked like that.

Stationary, it didn't look nearly as intimidating as it did when it rumbled and revved into the school parking lot, blasting AC/DC or Lynyrd Skynyrd through bass-laden speakers. It was loud and rough and All-American, just like the boy who drove it. Turned off and quiet, surrounded by the rows of baby blue and off-white houses in the suburbs, it looked as threatening as a plastic spoon.

Steve bit his lip, glancing up and down the street. There was no one else around. All the windows of the houses were drawn, flimsy light glowing from the edges of the curtains. He could just walk away. It didn't matter what Billy was doing in Belmont. It wasn't Steve's business.

He bent down anyway, squinting into the dark interior of the Camaro, pressing the cigarette back to his lips.

Outlined in the dim light of the streetlamp was Billy, curled up in the passenger seat, legs tucked up and feet resting on the driver's side. Steve knew his shape, the length of his legs, what his thighs looked like in his jeans, to know it was Billy, even if he couldn't see his face. A plaid blanket was draped over his torso, tucked up to his chin. It didn't look warm enough for frigid weather.

Steve dropped his cigarette, snuffing it out with the heel of his boot, and knocked on the window.

Billy jolted, smacking his head on the roof. He swore, loudly, jerking himself forward in his seat and glaring at Steve. Whatever was on his face, Steve couldn't read, shadowed by the darkness of night. Steve stepped back and straightened his spine, shoving his hands into his pockets.

It took so long for Billy to open the door that Steve thought he might drive off, but when he finally did, Steve put his finger to that look on Billy's face. He had seen it staring back at himself for weeks, molted and purple, fading to a sullen yellow.

It was still in the molted and purple stages. There was some dried blood around Billy's nose, and his left eye was swollen shut, a puffy

mass that made Steve wonder if he even still *had* an eyeball under it.

"You look like shit, Hargrove," he said. He dug his hand into his pocket for his cigarettes, opening the carton and offering it to Billy.

Billy stared at it like it was poison. Silence stretched between them for so long that Steve's hand shook with the cold wrapping around it. "Nothing gets passed you, does it?" Billy said, reaching for the pack.

Steve handed over his lighter wordlessly, watching as Billy light up a cigarette and inhale deeply. When he breathed out, he tipped his head back. He looked like a lone wolf, howling to the moon hanging fatly in the sky.

Steve watched him burn through the whole cigarette in silence. He'd never been like Nancy, book-smart and nerdy to boot, and it had been hard enough for him to string enough orderly sentences together for college applications, but he wasn't stupid. He'd never been *that* stupid.

He rocked back on his heels, hands curled into fists in his pockets. He sucked on his teeth.

"You got something you wanna say, Harrington?" Billy asked, cutting Steve with a hard glare, voice raising on the last syllable.

"Not really," Steve said after a moment, shoulders slipping down a notch. The last time they had faced off, Steve had only escaped by the skin of his teeth, and only because Max was wicked in a crisis. A fight in the middle of the suburbs at night would lead to the cops getting called—and another incredibly boring lecture from Hopper.

"You want another one?" Steve asked, holding up the pack of cigarettes. Billy swallowed thickly, Adam's apple bobbing along his throat, and nodded. Steve could see the edge of a bruise peeking out from under his collar. He wondered if Neil Hargrove had any underneath his shirt.

"It's supposed to get cold tonight, you know," he said. *And your jacket isn't going to keep you warm*, his eyes said for his mouth.

"It's cold every night. It's *winter*," Billy said, lips twisting into a sneer.

"You know what I mean."

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't." Billy blew a stream of smoke into Steve's face. Steve's eyes stung. "What's your point?"

"You'll freeze to death," he said softly.

Billy didn't say anything for a long time. The silence was new. Most of the time Steve couldn't get Billy to shut the hell up. From their first meeting to the showers, to the night Billy had kicked his ass, he had always been running his mouth, tongue flicking behind his teeth. The quiet was different. It was alarming, too. When Billy was talking, Steve knew what to expect. Billy could do anything now, in the silence, and Steve forced himself to keep his eyes on Billy's hands. If he threw a punch, he'd be ready.

"It's not that cold, princess," Billy said dismissively, leaning back against his car. He puffed on the cigarette, eyes locking with Steve's. It felt like a challenge.

"It's cold enough."

"For who?"

"Stop talking in circles," Steve snapped irritably, shoving his fists deep into his pockets. His fingertips were numb. Billy's cheeks and nose were stained a ruddy red by the chilly breeze. Steve expected his own were too. "Do you want a place to stay or not?"

Billy didn't look surprised. He didn't look shocked or mollified, grateful for Steve's jabbing offer. Instead, he looked *angry*. His eyes sharp, he sucked a last drag on the cigarette and tossed it to the ground. He spat next to it, like the offer was as worthless as the cigarette. "I don't need your fucking charity."

"I don't like you enough for charity, fuckhead," Steve said. Frustration stained the inside of his mouth like the chill, curling around the words. "If you freeze and die, Max is gonna have to deal with that."

She'd probably rejoice, he didn't say, but he didn't have to. Billy probably knew that already.

Billy smiled, sharp, all teeth. It didn't reach his eyes. "I didn't know you were into little girls. Does your girlfriend know?"

"You know what? Never mind. Fuck you. I hope your dick gets frostbite."

Steve turned to go, an angry hunch to his shoulders. Billy's hand landed on his arm. Steve tried not to flinch and failed. Shrugging out of his touch, he spun around and glared at Billy. "*What.*"

Hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders hunched up to protect his neck from the cold, Billy looked like a mirror image of Steve. Glare stuck to his face, lips twisted into something unhappy, he said stiffly, "It's just for the night."

Steve stared, counting back from ten in his head. "Yeah," he said, voice sounding strangled to his own ears, "just the night. And don't fucking steal anything, aight? I'll kick your ass. I'll get your sister to kick your ass. Again."

"She's not my sister," he said, and then Billy smiled again; less sharp, less teeth. He looked tired. Steve didn't know how he'd missed the dark circles underneath Billy's eyes. "You can try."

They took the Camaro, Billy in the driver's seat because he refused to let Steve take the reigns. Steve had conceded to the passenger seat, giving directions out softly as they passed street signs and lamps. He looked out the window, refusing to look at Billy. The radio stayed off, and the car was filled with the sounds of their breathing.

Billy didn't say anything as Steve unlocked the front door, flipping light switches and flooding the front foyer with yellow light. He kicked off his boots, careful to nudge them onto the boot tray. His mom threw a fit when water got on her precious cherry hardwood, sighing angrily about *swelling* and *staining*. Billy followed suit and let his boots drop to the floor beside the tray. Steve glared, bent down to set them on the tray and muttered *jackass* under his breath.

He didn't wait for Steve to gesture him through the hallway. Shoulder bumping Steve's as he walked by, he let out a low whistle as he

peeked into the living room. "So this is Casa Harrington."

"If you touch anything, I'll call the cops," Steve said wryly.

Billy didn't respond. Instead, he flopped down onto the overstuffed couch, reaching for the remote Steve had left on the arm and kicking his feet up on the coffee table. He clicked on the TV. Steve just rolled his eyes and sat down next to him, saying nothing.

It was more than surreal. It was something Steve didn't have a name for. Like the Upside Down, but more and less, but worse and better. A month ago, Steve wouldn't have thought it a possibility. Sitting in his living room with *Billy Hargrove*, side by side on the couch, watching a rerun of *M*A*S*H* in silence. Billy Hargrove, the boy who had beat his face in until it had been black and blue, the boy who had terrorized Lucas because of a step-sister he claimed to not care about.

He was supposed to hate Billy. Steve knew that much. So why had he let him into his home? He didn't have a good answer. He didn't have an answer at all.

Maybe the Upside Down had fucked with his head more than innocuous shadows creeping across the walls.

"Hey," Steve said, when *M*A*S*H* had switched to *Dallas* to the opening credits of *Charlie's Angels*, "do you—?"

Head tipped back, lips parted around a soft snore, Billy's fingers twitched in his lap. Steve watched him for a moment, memorizing the smooth line of his forehead, the way his lips weren't turned down into a frown or a sneer. He didn't look any different. He still looked like Billy. Steve didn't know why he was watching him.

Careful not to wake him, he reached across Billy's lap for the remote, clicking off the TV. He rose silently and left the room, flicking off the lights as he ambled up to his room, quiet on the creaking stairs.

In the dark of his room, Steve stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed. He pulled the covers up to his chin, counting down from one thousand while he stared at the stucco ceiling.

At three hundred and ninety-eight, he drifted off to sleep, lulled by

the inane image of slinking downstairs and covering Billy in one of his grandmother's hand-sewn quilts.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

He barely smothered a grin. "It can't be that bad."

"Bridge is pretty bad, Steve. It's, like, worse than Monopoly."

"Monopoly isn't that bad."

"Monopoly is pretty bad," Billy said loudly, drunkenly, laughing as he took another swig from the whisky bottle. Steve had tried to hide it from him, only for Billy to go to the bar in his dad's office and steal another one.

Steve slapped his hand over the receiver and hissed, "Shut the fuck up."

Billy was drunk by the time Steve made his way down the stairs in the morning. Somehow, that figured.

His shirt was open, exposing sun-kissed skin, no wife beater underneath. There were bruises on his collarbone in the shape of fingerprints. His hair was a mess, a wild tangle of curls that were flat on one side from where he slept. His face didn't look much better. Standing next to the kitchen window, a bottle of Steve's dad's expensive, imported whisky in hand, he looked like something out of one of those after school specials about drugs and drinking and too much of a good thing.

Steve stared for a beat too long, eyes dipping down to the bottle in Billy's hand, before he sighed. He should have figured. He really should have. His dad was going to kill him.

"It's a little early for that, isn't it?" Steve asked flatly, stepping around the island and opening the pantry, pulling down the coffee canister and filters. If Billy was drunk before 7AM, then Steve was going to need at least two coffees before he could deal with him.

He'd never actually seen Billy drunk. Wild and vicious, chaos rampant in his eyes, sure, but even at the last party he'd gone to where Billy had been, Billy hadn't been drunk. Steve hadn't known what he was, but drunk wasn't it. High, probably, by the way his pupils had been blown wide, lopsided grin on his mouth, all teeth and joy.

"It's never too early for a lil' hair of the dog," Billy said, turning on his heel to look at Steve. The whisky sloshed in the bottle. That smile was on his face against, the one made up of teeth and delight.

"Hair of the dog is for hangovers, not morning drinking." Steve filled the coffee maker's reservoir with water from the tap. "You owe me for that," he said, nodding to the bottle in Billy's hand.

Billy held up the bottle, squinting at the label like it was the first time he had seen it. "What the hell is it?"

"Whisky."

"Yeah, I can see that," he said, words slurring together on the S. "But what does it say?"

"You're the one holding the bottle."

"I can't read Russian."

"It's French," Steve said, flicking the coffee maker on.

"Can't read that either."

"What *can* you read?"

Billy tapped his index finger to his lower lip. "English."

Steve snorted, grabbing two mugs from the cupboard. He said nothing as the coffee maker burbled to life, filling the pot with barely enough coffee to fill a mug. Steve listened to the sizzle as it dropped onto the hot plate, pouring the coffee into a mug. He set the pot back and turned, reaching across the island to where Billy was nursing his pilfered bottle of whisky. Plucking it from his hand, he set the mug in front of Billy, ignoring the indignant *hey!*

"Don't pout," Steve said, holding the bottle out of reach as Billy tried to swipe at it. "Drink your damn coffee."

"You're no fun, Harrington," he said, definitely pouting. He looked like an overgrown, rock-and-roll toddler. Steve tried not to laugh.

"Yep," Steve said, watching the coffeemaker drip enough to fill his own mug, "that's me. No-fun Steve. Ready to ruin your before school drinking."

"I don't know why anyone likes you."

"I've been told it's because I'm real pretty."

Billy squinted at him, and then took a large gulp of his coffee. He winced as it went down. Steve almost offered him a glass of water. "Not that pretty," he said after a moment.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Maybe because I'm not an asshole?"

"Heard you used to be."

Billy had him there. "I used to be a lot of things."

"Yeah?" Billy propped an elbow onto the counter, chin resting on his fist. "Like what?"

Steve stared at him, uncertain. "None of your business," he said, finally, lamely. God, he really was lame.

"Oh, c'mon, Stevie. Who's this King Steve I keep hearin' about? You don't look like him."

"What am I supposed to look like?" Steve muttered, turning away from Billy to fill his own mug. He topped it up with a heaping of sugar and cream, stirring slowly, taking his time so he didn't have to look back at Billy. That surreal feeling from the night before was back.

"Like a king," Billy said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Steve braved a glance over his shoulder, eyes rolling again as Billy tipped whisky into his coffee. That figured. "You're just normal."

“What's so wrong with being normal?” Steve turned and stole the bottle back from Billy. Instead of squawking, Billy just grinned impishly.

“Normal means you're not special.”

“Well, shit, Hargrove,” he said flatly, “you're really onto something there.”

Instead of snapping back, Billy just smiled again, more teeth this time, taking another gulp of his coffee. It went down smoother; Steve watched his Adam's apple bob in his throat.

“You're chatty when you're drunk,” Steve muttered against the lip of his coffee, averting his eyes from Billy's throat.

“I'm not drunk.” Billy licked his lips. “Swear on my mother's grave.”

“You don't—” Steve stopped himself, shaking his head. It didn't matter. Billy was already well on his way to ass over teakettle; arguing about it would just waste time. “I assume you're not going to school.”

“Neither are you.”

Steve frowned. “Yes, I am.”

“No, you're not.

“Yes, I am.”

“No,” Billy said, straightening in his seat, “you're really not.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are? You can't tell me what to d—“

“Look outside, dumbass,” Billy said, jamming his thumb over his shoulder at the window. “No one's going anywhere.”

Steve blinked, looking over Billy's head.

He was right. He wouldn't be going to school. He wouldn't be going anywhere.

That meant Billy wasn't going anywhere either.

"Listen, kiddo," Steve said into the receiver, watching as Billy flipped through channel after channel on the TV, landing on one for a moment before switching to the next, "there's no way I can get my car dug out to come over tonight. I don't even think my car's going to *start*."

Dustin sighed, heavy and dramatic. "Yeah," he said, "it's just my mom, y'know." His voice dropped to a low whisper. "She wants to play *bridge*."

He barely smothered a grin. "It can't be that bad."

"Bridge is pretty bad, Steve. It's, like, worse than *Monopoly*."

"Monopoly isn't that bad."

"Monopoly is pretty bad," Billy said loudly, drunkenly, laughing as he took another swig from the whisky bottle. Steve had tried to hide it from him, only for Billy to go to the bar in his dad's office and steal another one.

Steve slapped his hand over the receiver and hissed, "*Shut the fuck up*." He dropped his hand, and to Dustin, he said, "Be nice to your mom. It's only one day."

Dustin sighed again, heavier, somehow more dramatic. Steve was impressed; he didn't think it could get much more melodramatic than before. "*Oh-kay*, I guess. But if it clears up, you're coming over, right?"

"Right," he said, cheerful even as he watched Billy spill whisky onto the couch. He thanked God that his mother was obsessed with Scotchguarding every piece of furniture in the house. "I'll be there in a heartbeat."

Dustin perked up at that, tone ticking up in joy. "Alright-y, captain! Hey, if you *do* come over, do you think you could bring—"

"I'm not bringing you alcohol," Steve said. Billy opened his mouth to

say anything. He picked up a cushion off the couch and whipped it at Billy's head. Billy sputtered, the bottle tipping over and spilling across the couch. Steve winced. "Hey, man, I've gotta go. My mom's supposed to be calling soon."

He said his goodbyes to Dustin and hung up the phone, shooting a dark glare at Billy. "You're an asshole," he said uselessly, because Billy already knew that. He was probably too drunk to care.

Closing his eyes, he pinched the bridge of his nose, blood rushing in his ears with the thud of his heart. He hadn't realized how horrified he'd been that Dustin would hear Billy until Billy had spoken. Betrayal was something Steve had learned intimately in the past year, and to see that on Dustin's face wasn't something he could handle. The idea of it churned cold dread in the pit of his belly.

Lucas...

He didn't even want to think about the look on Lucas' face.

"Clean that up," he mumbled as he left the living room. He locked himself in the powder room, sitting down heavily on the closed toilet, the heels of his palms pressed tight to his eyes.

What the fuck had he gotten himself into? What the hell had he *done*? Whatever terminal case of stupidity he had come down with last night had passed, and the panic had settled in, the clenching fear that clawed its way inside his chest, burrowed deep until it was smothering his heart.

Billy Hargrove wasn't someone he thought about. He was background noise, someone who did something bad to him once because he was a bad person. Steve had met a lot of those kinds of people. He used to be one of those people. Selfish, uncaring for the kind of damage he caused.

But he'd never been that *violent*. He'd never gone after a kid because he was black, because his not-sister was friends with him. The biggest fight he'd ever gotten into had been with Jonathan, and Steve could admit that he had that coming. He'd been a dick and he'd paid for it with a broken nose—but he'd never been like Billy.

Billy, who was sitting in his living room, spilling his dad's expensive alcohol on his mom's expensive furniture, drunk off his ass.

Billy, who last he'd heard, had been arrested last weekend.

Billy Hargrove, who wasn't his friend, who wasn't his buddy, who wasn't even someone Steve *liked*.

Steve pressed his palms harder to his eyes, until he saw bright-white stars behind his eyes, until his heart thudded to a steady pace in his chest. Calmed, splashed cold water on his face and ran his fingers through his hair, smoothing down sleep-twisted cowlicks.

When he stepped back into the living room, Billy was passed out, bottle of whisky lolling in his grip, spilling onto the carpet.

Somehow that figured, too.

He cleaned up the whisky, threw a blanket over Billy and stepped outside for a cigarette. Thirty seconds later, when a gust of wind walloped him in the face, he regretted it, chucking his barely-smoked cigarette into the snow and shivering his way inside. Billy was still asleep on the couch, head tilted down, chin to his chest. Steve left him there and went to make lunch and another coffee.

Turning the radio on low, he hummed along to Billy Joel and Duran Duran, wiping down the counters and putting the dishes into the dishwasher. He drank a cup and a half of coffee and traced the patterns of ice on the windows with his fingertips. It was quiet when Billy was asleep, silence pressing in on him. Steve poked his head into the living room just to see that he was still there. Every time, he was.

His father called at noon.

"Listen," he said gruffly, a shiver in his voice. Steve thought he could hear the bite of wind into the receiver. "You need to use the fireplace. Crank the heat. If those pipes burst, you're going to be the one paying for them."

"Are you *outside*?"

"Your mother," his father said tightly, "is talking to her sister."

Ah, Steve thought. Aunt Judith could talk a nun into cursing. "Tell her I say hi."

"Yeah, I'll do that," his father, sour.

Hanging up, he went to nudge Billy awake, prodding him in the shoulder with a finger. He woke like he had in the car; loud and violently, body jerking like he'd been hit. He turned an angry look to Steve, hands tangled up in the blanket. "*What.*"

"It's cold," Steve said brightly, just to be obnoxious. "Dad wants me to start a fire."

Billy squinted at him. There was sleep in the corners of his eyes. He looked like hell. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Start pulling your own weight, you lush." Steve pointed to the fireplace, the stack of logs beside it. When Billy didn't move, Steve narrowed his eyes. "Billy, *come on.*"

"I don't know how."

"You don't know *how*?" he said, incredulously.

"I grew up in California, dickhead. It never got that cold." Billy rubbed the sleep from his eyes and yawned. He stood, blanket crumpling to the floor. Steve resisted the urge to pick it up. Billy swayed on the spot, shaking his head and blinking. "Think I'm still drunk."

"Well, you did drink a whole bottle of Scotch. You owe me for that. That shit isn't cheap."

"It tasted cheap."

Steve bit his tongue, hard, to keep from laughing. He tasted iron in his mouth. "I'll let my dad know to only stock Budweiser from now on."

"You do that." Billy gave him a surly look. "Where's the lighter?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I'm not letting you near open flames." Steve shooed him away with a hand. "Go make coffee. Get sober." As Billy turned, Steve added, "And stay the hell out from the bar, Billy."

Filling the fireplace with wood and crumpling newspaper in between the logs, he wondered if he was going to find Billy face down in liquor when he was done. Fire fixed, still crouching, flames jumping from the paper to the wood, he closed the safety gate, locking it in place. He watched them lick into the timber, until yellow-orange-red tongues warmed his skin from a safe distance away.

Like always, Billy's presence was thick beside him, something that beat against the side of his head with all the weight of an anvil. It had happened the first time, during practice when Billy had left a bruise on his thigh and Billy had beat them 10-4. It had been humiliating. Even Coach had given Steve a weird look, eyes trailing over his shamed face with something that tasted too much like disappointment. Shown up by the new kid in every sense, at the one thing he had thought he was still good at, Steve had nursed his wounded pride back to health with the affirmation that Billy was a junior and he would be graduating soon.

"Do you understand the concept of personal space?" Steve asked, feeling Billy's jean-rough thigh brush his bare shoulder. A shiver slid up his spine. It had nothing to do with the chill still lingering in the air, being burned out by the heat of the fire.

Billy said nothing. Steve looked up, biting the inside of his cheek. Blue eyes as icy as the frost plastered to the windows bore into his. They weren't cold. Heat, hot as the fire warming Steve's forearms, and something thick, heady, coiled in Billy's eyes. Steve swallowed, counted from five, and opened his mouth to say something. Something didn't come out; instead, he licked his lips, biting the bottom one.

Billy's eyes dropped to his mouth, watching the curl of his tongue, the press of his teeth. His eyes seemed darker, hotter, hungry for something.

Steve stood abruptly, clearing his throat. He took three hasty steps to the side. "Do you wanna shower or something? You smell like wet

dog." Lackluster, barely an insult, but it broke whatever trance Billy had been under.

While Billy trudged upstairs to the bathroom, Steve poured himself two and then three and then four fingers of his dad's expensive liquor. They burned all the way down, doing nothing for the flames licking the inside of his belly. He poured himself another glass and sat down on the couch, turning the TV volume up to just below earsplitting. It didn't help. The thoughts in his head, muddled and cloying, flashes of Billy's face and eyes and the bob of his throat when he swallowed, weren't drowned out by the noise. They were amplified.

Long, knuckle-bruised fingers plucked the glass from his hand.

"Hey."

Billy grinned, feral, and downed the rest of the drink. He didn't look any more sober, standing in his own jeans and a too-small sweater Steve had fished out from the laundry room. He was bigger than him, more muscled, thicker in the thighs and hips and chest and arms. He'd heard Tina sigh dreamily and say, *look at that* assmore than once. Steve had always averted his gaze and asked Nancy a stupid question to distract himself.

"Lookie what we got here," Billy said, singsong. "Goody two-shoes Harrington breaking his own rules."

"It's my house. They're my rules." His dad was going to kill him. Maybe cut him up into little, itty-bitty pieces and toss his remains to the wolves.

Billy held up the glass like a trophy, triumphant, like he'd cracked a code he'd been puzzling over for months. "You're drunk," Steve said mildly.

He snorted. "I'm barely tipsy."

"Sloshed. Wasted. Plonked."

"No one says plonked anymore."

"I just did."

"Are you going to give me my glass back?"

"Are you gonna let me have another drink?"

Standing, Steve snatched the glass from Billy's hand. A tiny voice, secretive and pleasant, asked if it would be such a bad thing. School was closed for the day, his parents were stuck in Indianapolis until Saturday afternoon and neither of their cars would start in the cold. Billy had tried already. Getting drunk with Billy Hargrove wouldn't be the biggest sin Steve had ever committed.

"Okay," he said, "but you're not allowed to pick your poison."

In the end, he pilfered a bottle of vodka from the bar, cheap and gifted to his father by his secretary over the holidays, left to collect dust. It wouldn't be missed.

Slumped on the couch, a Frank Sinatra record playing in the background, Billy filled two shot glasses, sloshing vodka onto the table. Steve wiped it up with a Kleenex. "Okay," Billy said, and it sounded like declaration, "never have I ever been dumped by a nerd."

Steve shot him a dirty look, lips twisting. "What's your obsession with my love life?"

"Do you even have one?"

He looked down at the shot sitting on the table. A drop of vodka dribbled down the side. With a sigh, he picked it up, swallowing it down. "Never have I ever been hit by my dad."

It was, Steve knew, the worst thing to say. It was wrong. There were lines Steve didn't cross, even when he wanted to. Nancy and Jonathan had been the one lingering in his head for months, since they'd attached themselves to the hip less than a week after Nancy had dumped his ass, but Billy was something that had been tucked into the corner of his mind for just as long. Feigning indifference, distaste, was easy, especially after the number Billy's fists had done to his face. Billy had stayed to himself, to his crowd of admirers and Tommy and Carol, taking over the throne Steve had once sat upon

with glee. Steve hadn't cared, he'd told himself, but that wasn't entirely true. Disappearing from the world, a ghost of who he'd once been—no matter how much he didn't like who he'd been now—hadn't been easy.

Maybe they'd been dancing around it since the night before. Hopper at the Hargrove's, the bruise on Neil's face, the ones marring Billy's own, his collarbones, the one ugly one that peeked out from where Steve's sweater rode up on his hip. Steve *knew*, in the way Billy probably didn't want anyone else to know, in the way he didn't want anyone to know he was sleeping in his car in the middle of winter.

Billy hit him. *Hard*. Knuckles landed on his jaw, slapping Steve's head to the side, into the fabric of the couch. It hurt, stars exploding behind his eyes, black spots dancing in his vision. A hot throb crawled along his chin and cheek, a sharp sting weeping blood into his mouth where his lip had dug into his own teeth. He blinked until his vision cleared and the world righted itself.

He touched his mouth, fingers stained pink. Billy stared at him, eyes hard, sharp, angry. Fire burned behind them. Steve hadn't seen rage like that in a long time.

They stared at each other, Steve bewildered, Billy angry, for a long stretch of silence. Then Billy downed his shot, stood and walked away.

The slamming of the front door echoed in Steve's ears long after Billy had gone.

Notes for the Chapter:

On January 20, 1985, a sudden cold snap took America in its cold as hell grip and didn't let it go for three days. It set new records across the country for lows and snow fall, and caused Reagan's inauguration parade to be cancelled. According to a map I found, Indiana was struck with -16F to -25F lows, which is basically a normal winter day where I live. Since Hawkins doesn't have a definite location outside of being probably near Indianapolis, I'm

putting it closer to the colder areas.

You can find me on Tumblr @ celoica.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

“You didn't take your jacket?” Steve demanded, eyes widening as he caught sight of Billy. Crouched next to the fireplace, where he burned what looked like damp logs and old newspaper, pale and shivering, a glare of ice directed at Steve. Next to him was a pile of old blankets, moth-bitten and threadbare.

Billy bared his teeth. “Fuck you, Harrington. What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Watch your language,” Hopper said mildly, unzipping his jacket and shrugging out of it.

Billy stood slowly, fists curling at his sides. Steve eyed him warily. Would he hit him again? In front of the Chief? Probably, he decided after a moment, watching as he batted away Hopper setting his jacket on his shoulders.

“Would you fuck off?”

“Language,” Hopper said again, just as mildly.

“You know, I don't expect this sorta shit from you,” Hopper said as Steve climbed into the front of the truck.

It had taken Steve a long time to get his thoughts in order after Billy had left. *Fuck him* had been the first thought, the one he'd wrapped around his finger while he'd poked at his lip and spat blood into the powder room sink. His cheek was going to *bruise*.

His mother was going to flip out. After the incident with Jonathan, she'd been concerned. After the one last fall, she'd been *disappointed*. He'd held out, refusing to give a name or a reason for why he'd come home looking beaten to a pulp. He'd lost the car keys for nearly two weeks for that one. He knew it was going to be worse this time.

Halfway through filling a towel with ice for his face, he'd looked out the window. The thermometer had been frosted over, glistening with an icy sheen. He'd left the ice in the sink and gone looking for Billy.

Camaro still in the driveway, Steve had followed Billy's footprints until they'd disappeared into the snow. There was nothing but a sheen of white. No trail of bread crumbs to follow, no haze of Marlboro smoke to lead him. He'd gone back inside, warmed his hands in the sink and called Hopper.

It was the only thing he *could* do.

"Yeah," Steve said, buckling himself in. "Neither do I."

"I wasn't gonna ask," Hopper said, pulling out of the driveway and taking off down the street, "but what the hell was Hargrove doing at your house?"

He gave Hopper a weak smile. "We were playing Parcheesi?"

"Out in the snow."

"That was after he hit me."

Hopper cut him a sharp look. "*Again?*"

"I deserved it this time."

"You sure?"

"Real sure," Steve said, and looked out the window. Hopper's eyes were too intense and all-seeing. It was worse than being in the same room—or general area—as Eleven.

"Okay." It was long and drawn out, entirely unconvinced. "You wanna tell me anything else about it?"

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat, silent. Snow-peaked houses and cars drifted by. There were no signs of Billy. Steve didn't expect him to stick around after that. Steve wouldn't have.

"Sarah said that you were at the Hargrove's last week."

“Sarah?”

“Diner Sarah.”

Hargrove snorted. “She needs to learn to mind her own business.” He heaved a sigh and turned off onto one of the side roads, away from Steve's neighbourhood.

No signs of life dotted the sidewalks or front yard. Steve could see the shadows of people walking by their front windows, behind half-drawn curtains and blinds. They were smart. They stayed inside while it froze outside, instead of chasing around a boy that probably didn't want to be chased after.

“Is it true?” Steve asked, looking at Hopper. He bit the inside of his cheek. “Is it true what she said?”

Hopper sucked on his teeth. “Maybe. It ain't really your business, is it?”

“No,” he said. He bit down harder on his cheek. He tasted blood. “It's not.”

They were silent for a few minutes. Steve leaned forward to turn up the heat. Hopper didn't stop him.

“He was sleeping in his car. I found him last night,” Steve said, finally, clearing his throat. “He looked pretty messed up.”

Instead of saying anything, Hopper shook his head, letting out a sigh through his nose. He didn't look shocked or surprised or appalled. Steve should have guessed.

“Did his parents kick him out?” he asked.

Hopper didn't say anything. Steve asked again, more forceful. Hopper shrugged.

“You're not going to tell me, are you?”

“That boy,” Hopper said, “can tell you himself if he wants. It's not my business to be telling people shit. It's not Sarah's business either.

How'd she find out?"

Steve looked down at his hands, at the ragged cuticles he'd picked at while he'd been waiting for Hopper. "One of his neighbours came in and told everyone."

He shook his head again and pulled onto the main street. It looked like a ghost town, blanketed in undisturbed white. "Don't listen to everything you hear."

"Did you just call me a gossip?" Steve asked, voice pitched, incredulous.

Hopper's mouth twitched. "Who's not, in this town?" He had a point there. "Now," he said, looking over to Steve, "if you were a stupid teenage boy, where would you go?"

Anxiety bubbled in Steve's stomach as they searched for Billy. When thirty minutes bled into forty-five, only due to Hopper having to stop to answer a call and redirecting the deputies to help dig some unfortunate soul out of a snowbank, his hands began to twitch. He picked at the sides of his nails until blood welled up.

They ended up circling around town until they ended up on Cornwallis, at the old Peterson house that had foreclosed in the late summer. The back door was ajar, lock picked. Hopper went in first.

Steve shivered against the wind as he stepped in behind Hopper, tucking his chin deeper into his collar. Everything was cold; his fingertips, his toes, even his armpits. Inside the house wasn't much better. The wind couldn't slide across his skin, but it still felt like subzero temperatures.

"Billy?" Hopper called as he moved through the kitchen. There was a layer of dust on the counts, thick enough to draw in. "It's Hopper."

A shuffling sound, and then a *crack* sounded from the living room.

"You didn't take your *jacket*?" Steve demanded, eyes widening as he caught sight of Billy. Crouched next to the fireplace, where he burned what looked like damp logs and old newspaper, pale and shivering, a glare of ice directed at Steve. Next to him was a pile of old blankets,

moth-bitten and threadbare.

Billy bared his teeth. "Fuck you, Harrington. What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Watch your language," Hopper said mildly, unzipping his jacket and shrugging out of it.

Billy stood slowly, fists curling at his sides. Steve eyed him warily. Would he hit him again? In front of the Chief? Probably, he decided after a moment, watching as he batted away Hopper setting his jacket on his shoulders.

"Would you fuck off?"

"Language," Hopper said again, just as mildly.

"You can fuck off, too!"

Steve swallowed around the lump in his throat, taking a step closer. Billy narrowed his eyes and took a sharp step forward. Steve took a step back as Hopper shoved his arm between them.

"If you hit him," Hopper warned, "I'm gonna arrest you. Do you wanna spend a night in jail?"

Billy looked between them for a moment, as if weighing the option in his mind; to hit or not to hit. He lunged forward. Steve stumbled back, grabbing onto the edge of the door frame as his heel caught on the floor trim.

Hopper grabbed Billy by the shoulders, hauling him back.

"*Billy.*" His voice sounded as warning as an alarm bell.

Struggling against Hopper's grip, he licked his lips, tongue leaving a wet trail across the space between his chin and mouth. He looked wild, unfettered; he looked like one of the Demo-dogs when they caught the scent of blood. Steve tightened his grip on the door.

He struggled for a minute, until Hopper slung an arm from around him, dragging his back to his chest, his forearm a steel band to keep

him still. He spat on the floor at his feet, chest heaving.

“Fuck *you*.”

“Yeah,” Hopper said, as mild as ever. Steve stared at him, bewildered. “We heard that already. You gonna calm down?”

Billy spat again, less this time, and took a shuddering breath, like a shackled animal. Steve swallowed again.

“Yeah,” Billy said, a wide smile on his face as he looked at Steve. It didn't reach his eyes. “I'm good.”

Hopper let him go, slowly, arm raised, Billy stepped away from him but didn't go for Steve again.

“What the fuck was that?”

Hopper and Billy glanced at each other and then to Steve. Billy shrugged. “Nothing,” he said, as Hopper bent down to grab his fallen jacket, shaking it out as he said, “Not important. C'mon, boys. If the neighbours see us, we're screwed.”

Dazed and confused, Steve stepped out of the way, watching as Billy took Hopper's jacket, eyes downcast, refusing to look at his face. Hopper didn't say anything as he put out the fire and scraped the ashes into a nearby bucket. He took them outside to dump.

Hesitant, Steve set his arm on Billy's shoulder. Billy tensed, head jerking to look at him.

“What.”

Steve bit his lip. “I'm sorry. About what I said. It wasn't...it wasn't good.” He sighed and dropped his hand. “Listen, that's not what I meant. It's not good, I mean, but it's not what I meant.” Wincing, he said, “I'm just sorry, alright? I'm sorry.”

Billy looked at him, eyes narrowed, lip curling up at the corner in a phantom sneer. He could spit in Steve's face again. Steve wasn't even sure he'd stop him. It was no worse than another knock to the jaw.

“Kay,” Billy said, and turned away from him, zipping up Hopper's jacket as he left the house. Steve stared after him.

“Steve!” Hopper shouted from outside.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and followed them to the truck. He felt dazed, head clouted with something he couldn't put his finger on. As he climbed into the front seat of the truck, all he could think was, *what the fuck just happened here?*

It had to do with what Diner Sarah had said about the Hargroves and Hopper and what had happened on the weekend. Steve didn't need a yes from Hopper to know he'd at least been there. He could put two and two together well enough on his own, but the gaps were chasms the size of the whole in the ground the Upside Down had opened up.

Both Hopper and Billy climbed into the truck; Hopper in the drivers seat and Billy in the back.

“It's fuckin' cold in here,” he said, and Steve reached over to turn up the heat without a word.

Hopper dropped them off at Steve's house with a warning of, “If you pull that stupid shit again, I will kick both your asses and then cite you.”

Steve believed him. Fully.

“You should shower,” Steve said, as they stood awkwardly in the foyer. Steve stripped off his twenty layers and hung them up, unwinding his scarf.

“I just did.”

“You look blue.”

“It's my colour.”

“Your hair is frozen. I think you might still be kinda drunk.”

Billy glared at him. “I'm not.”

"Maybe a little bit?" Steve said, smile wobbly on his mouth. There was a strain in the air, thick and tense. Steve hated it.

"Anyone ever tell you you're kind of a priss?"

"Not lately," he said.

"You're kind of a priss."

"Thanks," Steve said dryly.

As Billy trudged upstairs, Steve cleaned up the kitchen, the leftovers from their aborted game cleared from the coffee table. He locked the bar in his dad's office for good measure.

Standing in the middle of the living room, he stared at the couch where he and Billy had sat, slouched and side-by-side, an ease between them that had never been there before. Billy had always been too busy playing games Steve hadn't wanted a part in for Steve to care. Too aggressive, too obnoxious; even when Steve had been King Steve, Billy would have been too much for him.

He wondered, not for the first time, how he managed to get himself into these situations. It had been Nancy and Jonathan at the house, trapped with a Demogorgon and armed with little; it had been Dustin, dragging him to his house because he'd fucked up, because he was just a *kid* and kids were supposed to make stupid mistakes. It had been sliding into the underbelly of the Upside Down, gloves and face masks, a group of kids who were his responsibility following him.

It had been the disappointment on his parents' faces, the way his father had said, "Well, I guess you'll be working with me, then, huh?" when they'd seen his report card. It had been the way Nancy had spat *it's bullshit* in his face while she stomped on his heart.

Two years ago his life hadn't been like this. It had been easy. Whatever dumb thing Tommy had said or done to upset Carol was easily fixed with some kind words and a reminder that Tommy was, as always, dumb as fuck. He could smooth-talk his way into extra credit to make up for failed assignments before his parents even knew about them.

He couldn't even keep his shit together now. It felt like he was floundering all the time, floating in the darkened abyss the Upside Down had left across Hawkins and inside himself. Fuck up seemed more severe, more permanent. The bruise on his cheek felt like failure.

Shaking off the thoughts, he headed upstairs, calling out when he didn't hear the sound of the shower running, "Billy?"

He stopped outside the bathroom door, peeking in. Steam fogged the mirror. There was a wet towel on the floor. Steve left it, crossing the hallway to his own room, where the door stood ajar. He stopped outside, leaning his shoulder on the door.

Billy lay across his bed, curled onto his side, hair a wet tangle across Steve's pillow. There were damp spots on the fabric. Bare chested and in another pair of Steve's sweats, he slept like he belonged there, like there was no other place for him to be.

Maybe the booze and the day had worn on him more than he'd let on.

Steve tiptoed across the carpeted floor to the bed. Billy's chest rose and fell with his breaths, sure and steady. Skin flushed from the shower, a rosy stain stretched across his collarbones and down to the waistband of his sweats, dipping beneath the V of his hips.

Steve stared, mouth dry. His tongue was sandpaper, an uncomfortable fit behind his teeth. A right-wrongness welled in his throat, like he was doing something illegal. Like he was doing something that even the Mind Flayer wasn't right with, let alone God.

He swallowed and bent over, grabbing the edge of the blanket. He worked it from under Billy's hip, breath caught in his throat when Billy shifted, curling tighter onto his side, letting the blanket free from his weight. Steve covered him and retreated, like a green soldier seeing the enemy for the first time.

He laid on the couch, on his side, watching daytime soap operas on low, interspersed with cold weather warnings and reports of people freezing to death across the country. When the lights cut, the TV screen turning black, as the sun went down, he sighed.

Everything about the day was just *shit*.

Heaving himself off the couch, he stoked the fire and made a peanut butter and jam sandwich, leaving the counter a mess to be dealt with in the morning. He thought about going upstairs to prod Billy awake but chickened out halfway up the stairs, tiptoeing down as if he could erase his own steps.

He stripped off in the laundry room, changing into a pair of sweats, a shirt and sweater, rolling on thick socks against the coming chill.

Before he dozed off on the couch, he prayed the pipes wouldn't freeze.

They were standing in the forest, barefoot and in the clothes they'd fallen asleep in. The leaves rustled over Billy's head, but no wind caught along their flesh. Steve shifted his feet, digging his toes into fluffs of virgin snow that felt like warm wax on his skin. Billy stood silent across from him, as still as a statue in crazy Mrs Morton's marble cherub garden. His skin was thin, waxy, almost transparent. Steve could see the outline of his heart thumping in his chest.

"Where are we?" Steve asked, but he already knew. He'd been here before, a dozen times.

"It's coming," Billy said without opening his mouth. He stared at Steve, eyes wide, hands loose at his sides. Something vicious clawed behind his eyes.

"What's coming?" He took a step forward; the snow stuck to the soles of his feet like gum.

"*It's coming*," he said again, lips unmoving.

The ground broke from beneath him, caving in, swallowing Billy Hargrove whole into the Upside Down.

"I'm cold."

Steve cracked an eye open. Billy loomed above him, close enough to

kiss.

“*Jesus*. Get the hell away from me.” He licked his sleep-chapped lips and sat up, scooting away until there was a safe distance between them.

“I’m *cold*, Harrginton,” Billy said again, more insistent. “It’s fucking freezing upstairs.”

Well, there go the pipes, Steve thought, rubbing the sleep from the corners of his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Like ten.”

“AM?”

“Does it look like it’s the motherfucking morning?”

“You swear a lot,” he said, and then yawned, arms stretching above his head. The blanket he’d tangled around himself in his sleep slipped to his waist.

“You got any other insights, Einstein?”

Steve ignored him and stood, glancing at the fireplace. Only coals burned, lowly. He shivered. Billy was right. It *was* cold.

“We should probably sleep in front of the fire,” he said after a moment, brain still foggy with sleep, tangled up in what was real and what wasn’t.

He glanced at Billy. He looked solid and warm. He’d pulled on another sweater, one that Steve knew had been buried in the bottom of one of his drawers because it was too big for him. At least his lips moved when he spoke.

“Go get some blankets from the laundry room,” Steve said, pulling pillows off the couch. His mom was going to kill him for putting her precious throw pillows on the floor. He figured it would be worth it.

Billy came back with an armful of blankets he dumped unceremoniously onto the floor while Steve built another fire,

crouched and poking at the logs with the iron poker.

Billy still looked real. Solid and grumpy and himself, if the cursing under his breath while he untangled the blankets was any indication. The lump in Steve's throat started to ease.

Fire burning hotly, Steve laid down next to Billy. His back was already turned, two thick down blankets pulled up to his shoulder. Steve didn't know why he expected anything different.

Arranging the rest of the blankets on top of himself, adjusting the pillow behind his head, he closed his eyes. The sound of the fire cracking didn't lull him into sweet dreams. Each *snap* made his eyes twitch, until he was restless, staring at the stucco ceiling for some kind of answer to a question he hadn't asked.

He fell asleep, finally, counting Billy's breaths like sheep.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, you can find me on Tumblr @ celoica. I'm currently accepting prompts and requests, so feel free to drop me a line.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve smiled, thin and bitter. “I hate the dark,” he admitted.

“Scared of the dark?”

Steve nodded, hit by how stupid of a thing it was to admit to Billy. He blamed it on the nightmares.

“Huh,” Billy said, and Steve didn’t know what kind of huh it was. He sat up, rearranging the blankets and peeling them back, holding them open. “C’mere. I’m fucking cold.”

Steve blinked and stared, eyes darting between Billy’s tired face and the space between them. “Are you asking to cuddle?”

Low-lit embers burned beside them, casting soft, barely-there shadows of their bodies on the side of the couch. Steve stared at the fireplace and wondered how long it had been since they’d fallen asleep. Darkness swallowed them whole, pressing in on Steve until it felt like drowning. It felt like suffocating on nothing.

Billy shifted against him, warm breath against Steve’s neck, the tip of his nose cold and contrary against his jawline. Steve shivered, flexing his fingers and toes, turning his head until he could look at Billy, head tilting out of the way. His neck protested, the angle awkward, and Steve sighed softly.

He could see his breath.

“Billy,” he said, soft and groggy, swallowing down the dryness in his mouth. Billy didn’t move.

“*Billy*,” he said louder, wiggling his arm out from where Billy had it trapped beneath his weight. He poked his arm, and when that didn’t wake him, he brushed his fingertips across Billy’s forehead.

He jerked awake with a sound of confusion, eyes wild and blinking, hair a tangled mess across his forehead. He looked like a deer caught in headlights; he looked like a child, confused and startled, trying to put the pieces together before he was entirely awake.

It was cute, despite the bruises.

Steve packed that thought away and put it on a shelf somewhere in the back of his brain.

They parted quickly, Billy's eyes widening a fraction before he scrambled back, yanking most of Steve's blankets with him. "The fuck you wake me up for?"

Steve grabbed the edge of the blankets Billy clutched in his hands and gave them a tug. "You stole the blankets and I'm cold."

Billy sniffed and rubbed his nose. "Make the fucking fire again, Harrington. It ain't that hard."

With that, he turned over, taking most of Steve's blankets with him. He laid on his side, back turned to Steve, and pulled the blankets up to his chin. Steve let him, watching him settle before getting up and tossing logs and more paper into the fireplace, poking at the red coals until they sparked up the paper.

He sat back down on the bed of blankets and stared at the fire. He was cold still, on the edge of freezing, but each second spent close to the growing fire sparks up something inside of him. It wasn't warm and it wasn't cold; it wasn't the dread of waking in the dark, only to turn on his bedroom light because he couldn't stand being in the dark for a second longer. It wasn't comforting, like the scent of his mom's perfume or the sound of Nancy laughing, alive and bright.

He didn't know what it is, but it had to do with Billy Hargrove. It had been there since Steve found him on the side of the road. It had been there since he called up Hopper and went looking for him, since he brought him home—*home*, because that was where he brought the guy who beat his face in—and laid down beside him to sleep.

Thoughts bounce around in his head and the restlessness picks at his

bones. It's too cold to put on a jacket and walk until his mind is blank. It's too cold everywhere but the living room, in front of the fire and beside Billy, to walk about the house until he's assured there's nothing under the beds and in the closets.

It's coming, dream-Billy had said, mouth closed around the words. Maybe it was an omen, like in *The Exorcist*. He'd been inside the Upside Down; maybe it had left a mark on him in the way it had Will.

Steve swallowed and looked at Billy. He wanted to shake him awake and ask if he'd seen anything. If he'd dreamed anything. If he knew anything.

In moments like this, Steve would drive around until he ended up at Nancy's house, climb in through her bedroom window like he'd done when they'd been dating, and she'd let him sleep on the floor like she hadn't when they were dating. It was something on his face that gets her to offer the floor, Steve knew, even if he had never asked; there's concern the size of fear in her eyes whenever he shows up at her window.

They don't talk about it, but she always let him sleep in the comfort of her room.

He looked away and to the fire, watched the flames lick up and brighten the room. The shadows at the corners of his vision look like monsters; they look like tendrils of vines. They looked like snapping jowls and ferocious pantomimed roars.

"Hey."

Steve flinched and looked over. Billy watched him, eyes heavy lidded, lips pursed like there was more he wanted to say.

"Hi," Steve said, soft and stupid, uncertain.

Rolling onto his side to face him, Billy said, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Steve smiled, thin and bitter. "I hate the dark," he admitted.

“Scared of the dark?”

Steve nodded, hit by how stupid of a thing it was to admit to Billy. He blamed it on the nightmares.

“Huh,” Billy said, and Steve didn’t know what kind of *huh* it was. He sat up, rearranging the blankets and peeling them back, holding them open. “C’mere. I’m fucking cold.”

Steve blinked and stared, eyes darting between Billy’s tired face and the space between them. “Are you asking to *cuddle*?”

Billy scowled and dropped the blankets. “Fine, freeze to death for all I care. I hope your dick goes first,” he snapped, laying back down and rolling onto his side, away from Steve.

Gently, Steve touched the bruise on his own face. It ached, tender, the swelling controlled by the ice. He’d already forgiven Billy.

Slowly, like he was attending to a wounded deer, Steve pulled up the blankets and slid under. He pressed up behind Billy, his chest to Billy’s back, arm sliding over Billy’s waist. The movement pulled at Billy’s sweater. The skin of Steve’s wrist slipped across Billy’s belly, warm and smooth.

Billy froze as Steve settled behind him, the length of his spine tense. Steve almost pulled away and spat out a quick apology, but then Billy sighed and relaxed.

He didn’t say anything. Neither did Steve.

He fell back asleep, into blissful, dreamless sleep, the rise and fall of Billy’s stomach lulling him to sleep.

“You’re *cheating*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Billy said, trying to roll the hidden card from under his sleeve. He didn’t bother to hide it.

Steve’s eyes narrowed and he tossed his cards down, reaching across to pluck the card from Billy’s cuff, waving it in front of his face. Billy

just grinned and snatched it, throwing it down on the pile.

“I win,” he said, and laughed when Steve groaned, dragging a hand down his face.

Steve had woken up alone, with the lights on and the fire still roaring beside him. Billy must have figured out how to feed it while Steve slept, keeping him, them and the pipes warm enough that they wouldn’t freeze. Billy had been nowhere to be found, and Steve had dragged himself upstairs to the shower. After, he’d found Billy in the kitchen, making coffee.

And pouring Kahlúa into his mug, swiped from his mother’s personal stock in the pantry.

Steve hadn’t said a word, topping up his own coffee with it, setting it back where Billy had found it.

They didn’t talk about the night before. Instead, Billy had grinned, called Steve a lush and they’d raided the fridge for some kind of food. Scrambled eggs and bacon that hadn’t gone bad with the power off, they’d eaten side by side, sipping coffee and Kahlúa, saying nothing.

After, Steve had put on a record and picked a fresh pack of cards out from his father’s office.

“I hate you,” Steve said sourly, sitting back and looking at Billy.

“Oh, boohoo. You’re just pissed you lost.”

“You *cheated*. It doesn’t count.”

“Says who?” Billy asked, still grinning.

“*Everyone*.”

“I heard you don’t care about everyone anymore,” Billy said, and slipped off the couch onto his knees beside Steve. He laid down on the nest of blankets, arms stretched over his head. His shirt—clean and stolen from Steve’s closet—rode up, a strip of golden skin exposed.

Some kind of quiet calm had fallen over the both of them. Whatever had passed between them in the night had made things easier, smoother to swallow down. Steve didn't know what had changed. It was nice, not fighting. Billy didn't suck when he wasn't up in Steve's face, pushing at buttons he wasn't allowed to touch.

Steve stretched out next to him, pushing his hair from his eyes. "I don't," he said.

"Why not?"

Shrugging, he said, "I don't know. They stopped mattering. Other shit's more important."

Billy snorted. "Like what? That girl? That weird kid?"

"Yeah, that girl and the weird kid."

"My sister?"

Steve turned his head, looking at Billy. Billy was looking at him, eyes heavy in the way they'd been the night before. "I thought she was your step-sister."

"She is," Billy insisted, a frown tugging at his mouth.

"It's nothing weird, man," Steve said. "She's just friends with my—"

His what? His who? It wasn't like with Nancy or Jonathan, with their plausible deniability. Steve was just Nancy's ex, the guy who hung around a bunch of kids because they all shared the same secret. Even Eleven, with her weird, watchful eyes, and her even weirder abilities, had a better excuse to be around them than Steve did.

Billy watched him, eyebrows raised, waiting. Steve sighed. "Dustin, the one with the teeth?" he said, pointing at his own mouth. Billy nodded. "I was trying to help him with Max."

"Help him?"

"He likes her, dumbass."

Billy snorted out a laugh, hands closing over his belly, legs drawing up as he laughed. He looked like a hyena, graceful and graceless all at once.

“Oh, fuck you,” Steve said. “Don’t be a dick.”

“That’s just—” Billy cut himself off with another round of laughter, making a vague gesture with one hand.

Steve scowled, rolling onto his side. He shoved at Billy’s shoulder. “Seriously, man, don’t be an asshole.”

Billy grabbed his wrist, fingers curling around the bones. “I’m not being a dick,” he said, still chuckling. “He’s just so fucking weird.”

Steve gave him a dirty look, eyes dipping down to where Billy still held onto his wrist. “He’s a nice kid. Just a little awkward.”

A lot awkward. Steve wondered if that was what happened to boys who grew up without fathers to beat them down; too much confidence and yet no self-esteem. Sometimes he saw a look of relief on Dustin’s mom’s face when he came to pick up Dustin, promising to have him back by nine; promising they were just going out for dinner and then the arcade, to hang out and talk.

If Steve had to guess, it felt a lot like being a big brother.

“I didn’t know you were into charity cases.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

Billy dropped his hand abruptly. Steve held his breath, wondering if Billy would hit him again. Billy narrowed his eyes and watched him for a long moment. Finally, he rolled his eyes and rolled onto his back. “Whatever,” he said, lacking bite.

Steve bit his lip and laid down again, hands folded over his stomach. Silence stretched between them again, awkward and stilted in the quiet. “Are you going to tell me what happened with your dad?” he asked, quiet and hushed. It felt like a secret that wasn’t meant to be whispered above a library-appropriate volume.

“Does it matter?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Kinda or yeah?” Billy didn’t look at him.

“I don’t know,” Steve admitted.

“See? Then it’s not your fucking business.”

“No, it’s not.”

Steve closed his eyes. Quiet, again, hung between them as thick as the snow outside. Steve hated it.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

Head turning, Steve opened his eyes. Billy looked at him, head turned, a few inches away.

If he wanted to, Steve could reach out and touch him, gather him close like he had the night before.

“What?”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Why are you scared of the dark?”

Steve stared, lips parting around a protest that didn’t come out. He’d already confessed too much to Billy. The night before had been weird—these past few *days* had been the weirdest of Steve’s life, and that was saying a lot—and the words had just come out. Steve Harrington? Afraid of the dark? He’d expected Billy to laugh, turn it against him and call him a pussy.

He licked his lips. Billy’s gaze dropped, watching Steve’s mouth.

He sucked in a breath and looked up at the ceiling. “Do you know about that girl who died last year?”

“That Harrison chick?”

“Holland.”

“Yeah, what about her?”

“She was Nancy’s friend. I watched her die.” Steve closed his eyes. It was as close to the truth as he could ever get with anyone.

Silence from Billy, and then, “Shit, Harrington. That’s fucked up.”

“I showed you mine. You show me yours,” Steve said, clearing his throat.

Billy laughed. “You already know.”

“Know what?”

“He hits me sometimes.” Steve felt him shrug. “I get mouthy, he gets pissed. That’s it.”

“If that’s it,” Steve said, a whisper as he opened his eyes and looked at Billy, “why were you sleeping in your car?”

Billy pressed his lips together, staring at the ceiling, chin tilted stubbornly up. “I left.”

“Or got kicked out.”

Billy smiled, teeth and anger. The tension was back, thick enough that Steve would need a chainsaw to cut it. “Maybe a bit of both.”

“Do you have anywhere to go?”

“Does it matter?” Billy asked, looking at Steve. His eyes were sharp, daring.

Steve chickened out. “No,” he said, and pushed himself up to his knees, standing, “I guess it doesn’t.”

He left the living room. They stayed on opposite sides of the house, Billy downstairs in the living room, probably drinking alcohol Steve couldn’t afford to replace and listening to Zeppelin loudly; Steve in his room, reading the same sentence of *The Stand* until the frustration overtook him like a storm and he threw the book across the room, watching it bounce off the wall and land on the floor.

He stared at the ceiling and the walls, out the window, at the floor. He listened to Billy move a floor beneath him. A mix of emotions, most of them Steve didn't understand, swelled in his chest, sliding down to his belly, curling into a knot.

In the end, he snuck a Valium from his mom's medicine cabinet and went to sleep before the sun went down.

They stood in the forest again, the snow warm and soft like mashed potatoes beneath Steve's feet. Billy stared at him from under the tree, lips parted, no words coming out.

He looked up. It was sunny and bright, not a spot of fluffy cloud in the sky, but the darkness of the forest swallowed them whole. Steve took a step forward; the snow stuck to the soles of his feet like tacky, a disgusting feeling he ignored.

Steve stopped in front of Billy. His skin was translucent again, the blue veins prominent against his jaw and throat. Red, deep and dark and terrible, leaked from Billy's eyes and stained the inside of his mouth, tinging his teeth. He spoke, mouth forming words, but no sound came out.

His eyes were dead.

When Steve reached out to touch him, he crumbled, withering away and falling to the ground in a husk of skin and clothes. They melted into the snow, becoming white and fluffy. Steve stooped down to touch it; it came away like the rest of the snow, tacky and sticky on his skin, like newly-chewed gum.

Steve was alone, left the to dark forest and the loneliness that came creeping from the trees.

In the morning, Billy and his Camaro were gone, a mess of blankets, an empty bottle and tire tracks in his wake.

Steve didn't go after him.

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, you can find me on Tumblr @ celoica.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

“Billy,” Steve said finally, low, husky.

The world melted away. The people passing them by on the sidewalk, eyes watchful; the buildings lining the streets and the cars whizzing by. They all disappeared, slipping away like the images in Steve’s dreams, until there was nothing left but Billy in front of him, teeth biting his lower lip, hand on Steve’s arm.

Billy said nothing as his hand slipped down Steve’s arm, fingers encircling his bare wrist, the pads of his fingers pressed to the heartbeat under his skin. It throbbed. It ached. Skin on skin felt like a burn, like Billy’s hands were made of matches and Steve was nothing but paper.

“Billy,” he said again, lower. It felt like a plead.

The cold wave rolled over Indiana like it did the rest of America. Sluggish and slow, frost and ice and death left in its wake. Hawkins stayed closed down when the temperatures warmed, the onslaught of snow too much for the dismal town-operated plows to handle.

Steve spent his Monday shoveling Mrs Henderson’s driveway with Dustin.

“This *sucks*,” Dustin said for the seventh time in ten minutes, wiping cold sweat off his lip with his gloved hand. His mom had bundled him up herself, wrapping a scarf so thick and tight around his neck Steve was surprised it hadn’t choked him yet.

“Quit complaining and shovel,” Steve said around a grin, tossing another clump of ice-and-snow over his shoulder.

“We could be doing anything else right now and it’d be more fun,” he

complained. He shoved his own shovel—borrowed from the neighbor—into the snow and rested his folded arms on the handle, chin resting on his arms. “A root canal would be more fun than this.”

“Have you ever even had a root canal?”

“No,” Dustin said, wrinkling his nose, “but I feel like I’m qualified enough to say that.”

Steve laughed, pushing another shovelful of snow out of the way. He set the mouth of the shovel against the snow, one hand balled into a fist setting on his hip. “We can do something after.”

Eyes bright, he asked, “Dungeons and Dragons?”

“Yeah. No way. Something *else*.”

Anything else. Steve had accepted that Dustin was a complete and utter dork, but that didn’t mean he had to struggle through trying to understand the complexities of D&D. The one time Steve had sat in on a game, which had been over five hours long, he’d felt his head would explode by the end of it. It felt like being in Algebra II class all over again.

Dustin pouted, lips pushing out. “You’re such a big baby.”

Steve held up a gloved finger, pointing it at him. “I know when I’ve lost. Pick something else.”

In the end, Dustin picked out his hidden VHS copy of *The Thing* from under his bed and put it on while Steve made mac and cheese in the kitchen. He handed a bowl and spoon to Dustin as he settled on the couch, tucking his legs up under him. Dustin had drawn the blinds and cranked the heat, and Steve wiped a drop of sweat off his upper lip.

If his parents had caught him watching shit like this when he was Dustin’s age, they would have yelled and grounded him for a week. Steve was pretty sure if Mrs Hendersen came home early, she would just sigh and say, *I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed*.

The tape was Dustin’s in the first place. Steve didn’t ask how he’d

gotten his hands on it, but he was willing to bet it had cost him a pretty penny and most of his saved up allowance.

They ate mac and cheese and watched the movie. Dustin hissed a *shut up* more than once when Steve leaned over to ask a question. Steve barely smothered his laughter. Enraptured by the blood and gore and swearing on the screen, Dustin zoned out, lips parted and vocal chords quiet for the first time in forever.

When the credits rolled, Steve picked up the dishes and walked them to the kitchen.

“Hey, Dustin?”

“Yeah?”

“Has Max ever said anything to you about Billy?”

Dustin snorted and looked up from where he was fiddling with the VHS player. “Uh, other than he’s a complete asshole?”

Steve pressed his lips together, scrubbing harder than necessary at the pot in the sink. “Yeah, other than that. Has she said anything about him?”

“Not really, no.” Dustin popped the VHS out and put it back in the *ET* case, snapping it shut. “He’s got a wicked ride and he’s a dick.”

“Does she talk about his dad? Ever?”

Dustin didn’t answer. Steve heard him padding up behind him, settling his hip against the counter beside the sink. “His dad? Nice guy, I guess. Kinda weird, but nice.”

Steve bit his tongue.

It wasn’t that he cared—except he did. He didn’t *want* to give a single flying fuck about Billy, but he did. Whatever had passed between them over the weekend had changed things. Steve didn’t know if it was the bruises on Billy’s face or the way Hopper had seemed unreasonably cool about the fact that Billy was anywhere near Steve. Maybe it was the punch Billy had given him. Maybe it was seeing

him sprawled across his bed, drunk and passed out, looking about as much of a threat as a chipmunk.

It was something. Something had changed, like a light switch being struck with a hammer.

Steve didn't want to care, but he did. He cared enough to stay awake at night, even after all traces of Billy had been washed from his sheets and clothes, and wonder if he was alright. He wondered if he was safe.

He cared enough to wonder if whatever his father had done to him he would turn on Max.

"How's he weird?" Steve asked, eyes on the already-clean pot he still scrubbed at.

"Just...y'know. Weird." Dustin shrugged. "Talks about military shit all the time. I think he was in the Navy or something."

"And Max never talks about him?" Steve asked, chancing a glance at him.

Dustin frowned, lips turned down. He cocked his head to the side. "No," he said slowly, like he had to think about it. "Why're you asking?"

Steve forced a smile on his face and flicked his fingers at his face, flecks of soap and water landing on Dustin's face.

"Hey!" Dustin cried, using his collar to wipe his face clean. He was grinning when he righted his shirt. "Snowball fight? Winner picks the next movie."

Dripping with melted snow and sweat, Steve let Dustin win. They watched *Blade Runner* and ate chocolate chip cookies from the box dunked in hot chocolate.

Steve thought about Billy the entire time.

Life returned to normal. The snow cleared, the sun brightened the

day and the Steve's world settled back into its routine.

He went to school. He argued with his dad and made nice with his mom. He hung out with Dustin and the kids. He worried about life after school.

He thought about Billy Hargrove.

Twice, he ran into Neil and Susan. Twice, he'd turned and walked the other way, crossing the street and taking the long way home just to avoid looking at him.

Once, he almost asked Max about it. He chickened out and asked about school instead.

Steve pretended his life had returned to normal, the days spent next to Billy and the night spent tangled up in body-warmed blankets with him forgotten along with the ice that breathed across the kitchen windows.

At night, he dreamed of Billy. They stood in the forest together, barefoot as before, cocooned in the ice-heat of his dreams. Sometimes they spoke. Sometimes they walked together. Always—*always* in the end—Billy disappeared from sight, slipping from between Steve's fingers when he reached out to touch him, desperate for some kind of solid contact.

When he didn't dream of Billy, he dreamed of the darkness and vines, of blood-tinged jowls biting at his heels and snapping at his fingers. He dreamed of drowning in the taste of sulfur and being smothered in bitter-sharp ozone.

He dreamed of dying until he didn't dream at all.

Instead, he stayed awake, cold water on his face and colder showers to shake off the beckoning call of sleep.

Sometimes, when Eleven was near and they were alone, she looked at him like she knew.

Slapping on a smile and a swagger in his step, he pretended all was well.

He didn't see Billy for almost a month after that.

Sometimes, in the thick of the hallways between classes, he looked for him: Blond hair, teeth flashing under flickering lights, a laughing like a jackal with Tommy and Carol. When someone called to him on the court, he turned, expecting to see Billy before the disappointment hit him.

He shook it off, uneasy, trying to ignore the ghost of Billy's body following him around school.

Jonathan and Steve stood on the sidewalk, paper cups full of coffee in hand, splitting a cigarette. It would be another hour before Jonathan's Ford would be ready. They loitered, like the teenagers they were, outside the coffee shop on the main street.

"You thought about college yet?" Jonathan asked around an inhale.

Steve wished he hadn't asked. He shrugged and reached out, taking the cigarette from Jonathan's hand. "My mom thinks I've got a shot at IU. She keeps checking the mail like it's going to make the letter come faster."

"What about your dad?"

Steve pulled a drag off the cigarette and looked across the street. "He'd rather I stay home and work for him."

"You gonna?"

Cutting Jonathan a sharp look through narrowed eyes, he asked, "Did Nancy tell you to ask?"

At least Jonathan had the decency to look guilty. "Maybe. Yeah." He sighed. "She's just worried, is all."

Steve pressed his lips into a thin line. It was all Nancy seemed to worry about, since she'd helped lick the envelopes and send them off. The million dollar question: What was Steve going to do after graduation?

He didn't have an answer for her, or anyone. Even Joyce had asked him over the holidays, eyes curious and bright, as if Steve was somehow supposed to know what the hell he wanted to do with the rest of his life. As if Steve even knew what he was doing *now*, here, in Hawkins, where everything used to make sense and now it didn't.

He scuffed the toe of his boot against the salt-rough pavement, puffing on the cigarette. He didn't look at Jonathan. "She shouldn't be. I'll figure it out."

"Listen," Jonathan said, and Steve closed his eyes, taking in a steady breath of fresh air, "it's not my place to say anything..."

"But?" Steve asked tightly.

"Maybe you should talk to her."

"And say what? Fuck off and leave me alone?"

"Do you want her to?" Jonathan sounded surprised.

Steve sighed through his nose, eyes opening as he handed the cigarette to Jonathan. "No, not really," he admitted, "but I wish she'd stop asking about it. I won't even know what I'm going to do until I get an acceptance letter."

Even then, he didn't know what he would do. Stay in Hawkins, leave, go to college. He could work with his dad, like he wanted, but he didn't want to. He didn't know much, but he knew that, at least.

"Tell her to lay off."

"Can't you do that?"

Jonathan laughed and took a few quick drags from the cigarette. "No," he said, "not for all the money in the world. That's your job."

"Fuck you, Byers," he said, not unkindly.

They lit up another cigarette and sipped their coffee, chatting idly about the kids and Eleven, about the weird way Hopper and Joyce seemed to be dancing around each other. They talked about school.

They talked about cars.

Blond hair, curly and short. Jean jacket over a sweater. Silver earrings. Tight blue jeans.

Steve did a double take, cigarette dipping from between his lips, head turning to squint across the street.

“Is that—?” Jonathan cut himself, taking a step forward. “I haven’t seen him in, like, a month.”

Steve stared, silent, pulling the cigarette from his lips and handing it and his cup to Jonathan.

“Hey, where are you—?”

“In a sec,” Steve said over his shoulder, checking right and left before jogging across the street.

Billy moved down the sidewalk, a paper bag tucked under one arm. He didn’t notice Steve.

Steve stepped through the slush of salt and snow, stepping around puddles and dodging the bodies of passersby.

He set his hand on Billy’s shoulder, breath caught in his throat.

Billy flinched, jerking away from his touch and spinning on his heel. A glare, hard and shining in the afternoon sunlight, crossed his face, eyes narrowing on Steve.

“What the fuck do you want?” he spat, voice rough.

Steve stared, dumb and useless, eyes roving over Billy’s face. The bruises were gone. Not even a scar etched into the skin, nor a blotch of red left to show for them. He looked off—younger and older at the same time, too different than he had the last time Steve had seen him.

“You cut your hair,” he said dumbly.

Billy raised his hand as though to touch it, hand pausing at shoulder

level. His fingers balled into a fist and he dropped it. "I'm glad your eyesight isn't shit. What do you want?"

He stared for a moment longer, at the curls falling over Billy's forehead. He liked it, he decided. Maybe better than the mullet.

Billy scowled and took a step forward. "Are you done staring?"

Steve shook his head, sucking his lower lip into his mouth. "Sorry," he said. "I just didn't expect the...you know."

Raising his eyebrows, he asked, "Finish your fucking sentence, Harrington."

"Hair."

The scowl was back, angrier than before. "Did you hunt me down to tell me that?"

He didn't know what he was doing. It was a running theme for him. School, his parents, Nancy's pestering, the nightmares and the darkness that swallowed him when he was alone—*Billy*. On his list, Billy was at the top.

"No, I just—" He sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I haven't seen you around."

The anger was still there, hot heat in Billy's eyes, but the scowl flipped up, a grin of teeth as he took a step forward. "You worrying about me, Steve?"

It was Steve's turn to scowl. "Fuck you," he said. He didn't deny it.

"Man, oh, man," he said, whistling lowly, shifting the bag under his arm. Amusement flickered in his eyes. "You *were* worried. You stay up late thinking about me, too?"

"Fuck *you*," he said again. It lacked heat and bite. It felt like Billy's eyes had cracked him open and he could see into his head.

"You did, didn't you? You got a crush on me or something?" Billy took a step forward. Close enough that if Steve leaned forward, he

could feel the heat of Billy's breath on his skin. Steve swallowed and looked away. "Oh, you *do*. Shit, I'm flattered. King Steve wants to gimme a kiss."

He wanted to hit him. Shove him to the ground and maybe land a kick. Something about Billy did something terrible to Steve. It felt like all his wires were crossed, like there was something scrambled up just by the closeness of Billy.

It had badgered him in his sleep and followed him into waking. Billy fucking Hargrove was on his mind all the time, infecting him like a disease. It was blood poisoning or something worse. Billy had crawled under his skin and stayed there, even after he'd left Steve's home.

"Shut up," he said, no heat or bite. Steve took a step back and Billy at a safe distance from him. "I just wanted to make sure you hadn't froze to death."

"Because you care."

"*Shut up*," Steve hissed, teeth clenched together. "I don't *care*."

"Then why are you here?"

"You ask too many fucking questions," Steve muttered. He took another step back. "I'm glad you're not dead. Enjoy the rest of your life."

Steve went to step around him. A hand grabbed his forearm, fingers tight and digging in. When Steve looked at Billy's face, he was staring, eyes clear, lips pressed together like he was holding something back.

A beat passed between them, and then two, three and four.

His skin felt too tight to his bones again. A breeze flitted across the air, brushing Billy's hair off his forehead. Steve wanted to lean in and touch it.

"Billy," Steve said finally, low, husky.

The world melted away. The people passing them by on the sidewalk, eyes watchful; the buildings lining the streets and the cars whizzing by. They all disappeared, slipping away like the images in Steve's dreams, until there was nothing left but Billy in front of him, teeth biting his lower lip, hand on Steve's arm.

Billy said nothing as his hand slipped down Steve's arm, fingers encircling his bare wrist, the pads of his fingers pressed to the heartbeat under his skin. It throbbed. It ached. Skin on skin felt like a burn, like Billy's hands were made of matches and Steve was nothing but paper.

"Billy," he said again, lower. It felt like a plead.

Letting go of his arm, Billy stepped back, a smile that didn't reach his eyes stretching across his mouth. Steve stared at it. His skin tingled where Billy had touched.

"Do me a favour," Billy said. "Stop caring."

Like always, Hawkins turned into a ghost town after dark. The bars and restaurants closed, and people packed it in and went home.

Like always, night brought the terrors, gnarled fingers twisting in Steve's sleep and playing games inside his head.

Like always, lately he didn't sleep.

"You should see a doctor," Father Patrick said through the crisscrossed divider as Steve stared at his hands, palm-up, resting on his knees.

If his parents were around, it wasn't hard to sneak out when his father turned off the kitchen light and took a sleeping pill so strong it could knock out a horse. He'd slipped out the back door and walked four blocks to the church he'd grown up in.

Father Patrick was grizzled and old, beard bushier than Santa Claus', but he let Steve sit there in silence, let him confess half-truths through a screen.

It hadn't been the direction he'd been headed the first time, thirsty for sleep and aching with restlessness, but he'd ended up St Jude's anyway.

It fit. Patron saint of lost causes and desperate situations.

Steve didn't remember a time when he felt like anything but.

"Not God?" he asked, amused.

"God made doctors to help, Steve. He's not the cure for all that ails you."

"If I pray enough, won't He let me sleep?"

Father Patrick was quiet for a moment. "You know it doesn't work like that."

"I'm starting to question the old man in the sky, Pat."

"You've been questioning since the moment you got here," he said, not unkindly, and asked if that would be all for the night.

He walked the lonely streets, kicking trails of snow out of his way. He stopped at the ends of the streets and reached down, picking up handfuls of it and letting it melt between his fingers. Palms red and burning with chill, he stared at them, water dripping into his sleeve.

Stop caring. Echoing in his brain since they'd left his lips, Steve could hear it in every tone of Billy's voice. Angry, frustrated, wild; sleep-thick and gentle, an edge of a whine. Pinpointing the one that had rolled off Billy's tongue was like trying to write a test he hadn't studied for.

It was worse than the shadows twisting along the walls of his room. They followed him around in real life, reality twisted by his own dark thoughts. Billy's voice stayed in his head, buried so deeply Steve didn't think he could cut himself and drain it out.

He wanted to punch something again. What had he *done* to him? Blood poisoning had been right—Billy had infested his entire being, filling up the empty place left by the hands of the Upside Down.

It was worse than Eleven's manipulations, when she whispered inside his head and read his thoughts. The feeling of wrongness disappeared when she did. Billy stayed, haunting, an echo of memory Steve couldn't shake off.

He kicked at the snow, angry again.

Stop caring.

He cared, painfully so. It had been Steve's problem since he had been young. He cared too much, attached his feeling to people and things. It stung when they pulled away from him, prying off his emotions from their beings and flitting off, leaving him with ruined gaps to patch up on his heart.

Nancy had done it, easily. *It's bullshit* had ripped his heart in two, and Jonathan had singed the tattered pieces with betrayal. They'd been friends, Steve had thought. They had been friendly, at least. Why did he have to want Nancy, if they were friends?

How did Billy know? A lucky guess? Had he read it on Steve's face?

How did he know?

Steve stopped, pressing the heels of his cold palms to his eyes, pressing down until spots danced behind his eyelids. His head ached with it, full of thoughts of Billy.

Even alcohol couldn't dull the obsession his brain had with Billy. A week ago, when his parents had fucked off for a weekend trip of skiing and mojitos, he'd tried all weekend. All it had left him with was a killer hangover and a bad taste in his mouth.

He dropped his hands and kept walking, cold hands in his pockets.

At the twenty-four hour corner store at the end of the main street, he stopped again, picking up snow in his newly-warmed hands. The chilled easily, reminding him he wasn't sleeping. He touched wet fingers to his face, to the dark hollows under his eyes.

"You look like shit."

Steve paused, fingers still against his skin. A laugh, hysterical and edged, bubbled from his throat. It kept bubbling even as he turned to look at Billy. He laughed until tears collected in his eyes. He wiped them away with frigid fingers.

Billy stared from his perch on the hood of his car, cigarette held between his fingers, impassive. "When was the last time you slept?"

How does he know, whispered in Steve's mind, achingly familiar and yet so achingly unfamiliar. "I don't know," he admitted, wiping the last of the tears from his eyes. His mouth hurt from laughing so hard.

Billy tossed his cigarette to the ground and slid off the Camaro. Moving with slow and certain steps, he took Steve by the wrist.

It burned, again.

Or maybe that was just his head. Steve couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure of anything.

Billy said nothing as he reached out with his free hand, straightening the collar of Steve's jacket, head tilting to the side.

"You're all fucked up, aren't you?" he said finally.

Steve nodded.

"You should come home with me," Billy said.

When he pulled on Steve's hand and led him to the car, Steve didn't fight him.

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

“You’ll fall asleep on me.”

“I won’t.”

“You looked like you were ready to keel over back there.”

“I feel better now.”

“No,” Billy said, soft as fresh snow, “you don’t.”

Steve turned his head and froze. Arm stretched out on the back of the couch where it hadn’t been a moment again, Billy’s knuckles collided with his cheek, fever-hot and gentle where he unfolded his fingers to brush along Steve’s jaw.

“You told me not to care,” Steve whispered. A confusing cluster of emotions tangled themselves in his chest, settling there, anvil-sized.

“I did.”

“Did you mean it?”

“No.”

Tucked safely into the passenger seat of Billy’s Camaro, Steve watched Hawkins slip by in the window, disappearing into the odd street lamp before vanishing altogether.

He hadn’t asked where home was. He hadn’t asked anything at all. Billy had opened the car door for him and closed it behind him, cigarette jammed between his lips as he’d started up the car. The radio whined out some power ballad Steve couldn’t remember hearing before. Billy hadn’t said a word. Steve followed his lead.

Sinking into the seat, fingers tucked up into the sleeves of his jacket, Steve turned his head. In the darkness he could only make out so much of Billy. No earrings this time, and his hair had been slicked back from his face. Steve wanted to reach out and touch it, tug at it until the gel came loose and he could play with the curls.

He bit the inside of his cheek, picking at the edges of his cuticles. *Where are we going* hung on the tip of his tongue, wanting to slide past his teeth but not budging. Whatever tension that had grown between them, uncomfortable and full, that day on the main street had evaporated, leaving nothing but silence and a rough voice crackling from the radio. Breaking it seemed like a sin.

Billy pulled onto a side road, where trees still thick with green hung over the bumpy road. The Camaro seemed ill-equipped for it; Steve felt every pothole and dent through his spine.

Through half-lidded eyes, he watched Billy suck on another cigarette, the window rolled down a crack to flick ashes out. Lazy, one hand on the wheel, he looked at ease in a way Steve hadn't even seen when he'd been fast asleep, undisturbed by dreams or thoughts.

Where had he been? He wanted to ask. He wanted to reach out and take his hand, lock their fingers together for something to stay anchored to, and ask where the hell he'd been for weeks and why he'd cut his hair and where were they going.

Hands to himself, he closed his eyes instead, bathed by the warmth of the heater and the radio and the soft rustle of Billy moving in the driver's seat. Sleep beckoned him close, pulling at his eyelids.

When the car stopped, the engine cutting out, Steve opened his eyes. He blinked, squinting into the dark.

"The lake?" he said, rusty. He licked his lips and sat up.

"Yep," Billy said, offering nothing else as he climbed out of the car.

Steve followed, rubbing at his sore eyes with the back of his hand. They ached the way they did when he stayed up too long reading. In the darkness, he made out the shape of a trailer, metal roof clear of

snow and a green garbage can beside the small wooden porch.

“Who’s place is there?” Steve asked, suspicious.

Billy looked over his shoulder at him, smile brilliant. “Mine.”

Keys in hand, Billy climbed the stairs and unlocked the door. Steve watched from the bottom of the stairs. He was kidding, wasn’t he? It didn’t look like much, but it was more than Billy could afford. It was more than *Steve* could afford. It was more than any seventeen-year-old could afford.

“I don’t believe you,” Steve said, exhaustion burying right down to his bones, when Billy raised an eyebrow, holding the door open.

“You think I killed the guy who owns it?”

“So it’s not yours.”

“It’s mine enough.”

“How?”

Amused, Billy said, “I rent, Steve. Is it that complicated?”

Steve swallowed down the shame—he hadn’t thought of that, despite everything he’d seen with the Henderson’s and their shitty, shitty landlord—and walked up the stairs. He ducked inside, body twisting to avoid brushing against Billy. Billy stepped forward, until their arms brushed. Steve shivered and stepped away. It felt hot, despite the layers of fabric between them. Touching Billy always felt like molten heat.

Billy kicked off his boots and closed the door, shrugging out of his jacket. He tossed it on the arm of the couch and leaned over, flicking on the switch of a lamp.

Yellow light filled up the room, illuminating the sparse furnishings. No pictures or art on the walls, no curtains hanging over the windows. A couch and lamp, along with a scuffed matching coffee table; a TV stand with an old TV, and a rickety-looking breakfast table and mismatched chairs. The wood paneling looked solid and the

carpet looked clean.

Steve shifted from one foot to the other while Billy moved to the small kitchen, flipping on the light as he went. Fridge, stove, a coffee maker, a sink piled with dishes. The linoleum was a rusty red. It looked like dried blood.

“Are you going to take off your jacket?” Billy asked, opening the fridge, one hand on his hip.

Steve swallowed and shifted, unbuttoning his coat carefully. He hung it on the hook beside the door and bent over, untying his boots. He set them neatly on the ratty welcome mat.

When he stood, Billy was already seated on the couch, a box of pizza on the coffee table, flipped open to three fourths of a pie. Steve stared at it as if it were a dog with two heads and a pig’s tail.

“You gonna sit down?” Billy said between a mouth full of cold pizza.

Steve wrinkled his nose. “You’re disgusting.”

“You’re still standing.”

Relenting, Steve sat down on the opposite side of the couch, tucked into the edge where the cushion met the arm.

Billy cast him a curious look, licking grease off his fingers. Steve watched the slide of his tongue along his skin, the damp trail of saliva he left behind. “You look like shit.”

“Don’t I always?”

Billy’s mouth spasmed. “No, not always.” He reached for another slice of pizza. Instead of taking a bite, he handed it over. Steve took it, trying not to think too hard about the spit on Billy’s fingers. “You look like extra shit right now.”

Inspecting the piece of pizza, he shrugged. “I’m tired.”

“This about that girl? Beatrice or whatever?”

“Barb.” Steve smiled thinly and took a bite. “I see her in my sleep sometimes.”

Billy didn’t say anything, chewing on his pizza. Steve shifted uncomfortably, eyeing the window across from the couch. “Have you ever seen something like that before?”

“Someone die?”

“Yeah.”

“Nah. Close, though.” Billy polished off his slice and licked his fingers clean. Stretching his arms above his head, he sunk lower into the couch. “Had a friend who got knifed when we snuck into a bar. He got drunk and stupid. The guy was bigger than him. He lost a kidney and everything.”

“I didn’t expect that,” Steve said after a moment, picking a pepperoni off. It tasted like cardboard but he forced himself to chew. “Where were you?”

“Calling 911.”

“You didn’t fight?”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Is that why you came here? To Hawkins?”

Billy turned his head, cheek resting on the couch. His gaze was distant. Steve wanted to take the question back. “No,” he said after a moment. His lips twitched into a hint of ruefulness. “I’ll tell you one day.”

Tossing the crust into the box, Steve wiped his fingers on his shirt, uncaring. “How about today?”

“You’ll fall asleep on me.”

“I won’t.”

“You looked like you were ready to keel over back there.”

"I feel better now."

"No," Billy said, soft as fresh snow, "you don't."

Steve turned his head and froze. Arm stretched out on the back of the couch where it hadn't been a moment again, Billy's knuckles collided with his cheek, fever-hot and gentle where he unfolded his fingers to brush along Steve's jaw.

"You told me not to care," Steve whispered. A confusing cluster of emotions tangled themselves in his chest, settling there, anvil-sized.

"I did."

"Did you mean it?"

"No."

A beat ticked by and then another. Steve swallowed down the saliva flooding his mouth, eyes on Billy's face. The look there unsettled him, twisting his stomach up into high knots that threatened to spill out from his throat.

He'd seen it on girls before. He'd put it on girls before—the heady, heavy look they got when he bit his lip and leaned in close, hovering an inch away until they went breathless and pliant, and leaned into him. Their throat would work when his fingers grazed over their leg, playing with the hem of their skirt, dipping underneath to touch the delicate skin behind their knee.

Want, as raw and rough as hard liquor, was something he knew like the back of his hand.

On Billy it looked like sin. In his eyes, on the shape of his mouth and the set of his jaw, it looked like something Steve wasn't supposed to know about. Like something holy they whispered about in church but never looked at directly. Like a secret of the universe he wasn't supposed to believe.

Steve looked away first.

"You're right," he said, and the ache that had formed in his chest

worked itself into the word despite himself. “I should sleep.”

Steve looked at the floor while Billy stood. “The bedroom’s down the hall.”

“I’m okay with the couch,” he said stiffly.

“Sleep on the fucking bed, Harrington,” Billy said, walking across the open space to the bathroom. He slammed the door shut behind him.

Harrington. Not Steve anymore. Just Harrington, the kid he’d fucked up in the Byers’ house all those months ago.

Steve stared at his hands, palms up in his lap. He wanted to laugh again, loud and irrational, until his eyes burned with tears again. Head heavy with thoughts and chest full of feelings he didn’t have names for, he rubbed his eyes and stood.

Maybe, like in his dreams, he really was going crazy.

That night, he dreamed of the scent of fresh-cut grass and golden hair in the sunlight.

“You’re staring,” Billy murmured, husky with sleep, eyes still closed.

Billy was right because he was. Brain still numbed by pleasant dreams and a restful sleep, he tried to work out how Billy had made it from the couch where he’d silently laid down after he’d left the bathroom to the spot next to Steve on the bed.

The sheets were tangled around their legs, blanket sliding off Billy’s hips and falling into a jumbled lump between them. The air was hot, thick with electric heat rattling from the space heater at the foot of the bed.

“You’re in the bed.”

Billy groaned and turned over, pinning the shared sheet underneath him as it yanked off Steve’s body. Despite the stolen sweatpants, too big in the hips and needing tied extra tight, he felt naked without it.

Billy buried his face in his pillow, arms tucked underneath it.

When he didn't speak, Steve settled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. A night of sleep without shaking awake from fear had done his brain good. More rested and awake than he'd been in weeks, and sleeping next to Billy once again.

Billy moved next to him, lifting his face from the pillow. Steve turned his head to look at him. Billy squinted at him and yawned. "You got a stupid look on your face."

"It's just my face."

Billy cracked a smile and rolled onto his side, legs shifting. His knee brushed against Steve's thigh through the sheet. Steve wondered what it felt like skin to skin.

"Your face isn't stupid. Just your hair."

"Who are you calling stupid?" Steve asked, fighting back a smile. "You had a *mullet*."

"And it was fucking beautiful."

"It was awful. I'm glad you cut it."

"You're a bit of a dick. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"It looked like a rat's nest, Billy."

"You should see yours right now." Billy was smiling, soft around the edges and his eyes, when he reached over to touch a piece of hair that had fallen into Steve's face. Twisting it about his fingers, he froze, smile slipping from his face. He looked like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar.

For what felt like forever, neither of them moved, breath clogged up in Steve's chest—and then he sighed, settling his cheek against his own pillow, twisting his body beneath to lay on his side, a mirror of Billy. His hand fell between them, fingers uncurling until his knuckles bumped against Billy's bare chest, grazing his nipple.

The tension drained from Billy, muscles loosening, body falling slack into the bed. He tugged at the strand of hair between his fingers. "It's bad," Billy said, mouth twitching back into a smile.

Steve smiled back, eyes flicking up as Billy let go of his hair. "Yours isn't any better."

"Better than yours."

"What's your obsession with being better than me?"

Billy's smile slipped again. Steve felt like smacking himself. "I don't," he said, slow and uncertain.

Steve frowned, straightening the hand between them until his fingers pressed more firmly against Billy's chest. His skin was warm, smooth where he touched, light hair curling at the center of his chest. They were faint in the morning light.

"Since day one," Steve said, thumb moving back and forth, the flat of his nail running along Billy's chest. "Always talking about King Steve and all the shit I used to do. What's that about?"

Billy's mouth twisted into something ugly and unhappy. "You were the king. I had to beat you."

"Why?"

"To be you."

Blinking, he watched Billy's face, mouth trembling around a laugh. "I would've let you have it. I don't want it."

Billy sighed, lips still down. "Yeah," he said, "I know that. I don't want it either."

The silence coiled around them, an uncomfortable weight in bed between them. "Tommy can have it," Steve said.

Billy paused, lips frozen from their downward turn, and then he laughed, bright and sharp, teeth flashing white in the sunlight. Something inside Steve's chest swelled and he laughed too, hand

turning to press against Billy's chest, feeling the heat and shake of his breath in his lungs.

"They're doomed," Billy said, settling back down, chuckling. "Hawkins is doomed."

"It's already doomed. They think you're in rehab."

Eyes sharpening, mouth still turned in joy, Billy asked, "What the fuck? *Why?*"

Steve shrugged. "That or you're in jail."

"They'd know if I was in jail."

"They would."

"So I have to be in rehab?"

"They've never met a drug addict before—and Old Man Higgins doesn't count."

"What do they think I'm on?" Billy asked, curious, edging closer to Steve until his chin rested on the edge of the pillow.

"Heroin. Or meth. I lost track." At the narrowing of Billy's eyes, he said, "I don't think anyone in this town has ever seen either in their entire life."

"Yeah, makes sense," he said with a nod of his head. "With all that inbreeding, something's bound to go screwy with your heads."

"Don't be a dick."

"Hawkins is pretty fucking backwoods. You're all a bunch of bumpkins."

Turning his head to hide his mouth in the pillow, Steve smiled. "Maybe," he said, muffled by fabric, "but you don't have to say it."

"You were thinking it."

"I've thought it all my life," he admitted.

Sobered so suddenly it hit Steve like a smack across the face, Billy asked, "You leaving after?"

"After?"

"Graduation."

Steve looked away, rolling onto his back, hand pulling away from Billy's chest. He missed the contact. "I don't know."

"You don't?" His voice ticked up at the end. Without looking at him, Steve knew there was disbelief in his eyes.

"I don't think I'm going to get into college." The silence was deafening, and Steve drowned it out with, "I fucked around too much. Didn't study, didn't know what I wanted to do. I'm barely going to graduate." He sucked on his teeth. "I'm going to work for my dad. He's been planning it since I was born."

"You can leave still," Billy said, finally, after a solid minute of silence.

"Leave?" Steve echoed, looking at Billy.

Elbow tucked underneath him, he had a hand in his own hair, head propped up against his palm. "Yeah, *leave*. You know, get in your car and fuck off forever."

"It's my dad's car."

"Take the bus."

"To where?" he asked, skeptical, eyebrows pulling together.

"Wherever the hell you want, Steve," he said, one corner of his lips pulling up. Something tugged at Steve's chest, unraveling a knot. He was Steve again. "Go live in Alaska if you want."

"It's cold there."

"It's cold here."

“Maybe I’m tired of the cold.”

The tip of Billy’s tongue touched the corner of his mouth. His eyes were heavy again, dark in the morning light, dark against the white of the sheets and the tan of his skin. “You ever been to California?”

Sun and heat, sandy beaches and the endless stretch of bright blue ocean—Steve had seen it on postcards and on movie posters. The farthest Steve had ever gotten to that was a two week trip to Myrtle Beach when he’d been nine and indifferent to how beautiful the sun looked in the sky.

He imagined Billy there, under the hot sun, shirtless and more tan, more golden than in the cold of Indiana. He imagined what Billy looked like stretched out on caramel-coloured sand, droplets of water clinging to his skin and slicking his hair.

Steve’s eyes dipped down to Billy’s mouth, where his tongue lay against the corner of his lips. Something tightened in his belly. Billy’s eyes darkened, half-lidded and tongue sweeping across the pink of his lip. Steve leaned forward, words perched on the tip of his own tongue.

Knocking heavy enough to shake the foundation slammed against the door.

Steve jerked, letting out a strangled noise as his head jerked toward the sound. Billy muttered something, terse and angry, under his breath that Steve didn’t quite catch. When the pounding continued—was it a giant’s fist thumping against the siding, Steve wondered—Billy shoved the sheets and blankets from off him, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and standing. Sometime between going into bathroom and climbing into bed, he’d changed into basketball shorts.

The hammering knocks continued, heavy and constant.

“Yeah, I’m fucking coming!” Billy shouted, reaching for a sweater from the top of the laundry hamper, wrenching it over his head. His curls sprang upward, twisting and coiling in a thousand different directions. Steve sat up, scooting to the edge of the bed to peer through the open doorway as Billy yanked the door open, glare set on

his face.

It slid off his face almost instantly, hand clenching on the door like he meant to shove it closed. A foot jammed its way between the door and the frame, and Jim Hopper walked himself into the trailer with ease, hat tilted on his head and in full uniform.

Pale under his tan, Billy glanced over his shoulder at Steve, lips pressed into a thin line. Steve stared back, hands curled loosely in the blankets.

Hopper looked between Billy and him once and then said, sharp, to Billy, "I don't wanna fucking know. Steve, get your clothes on. Your parents are looking for you."

Shit, shit, shit. It rang through Steve's head and he sat on Billy's bed, immobilized by the hard look Hopper gave him. Shame, thick as tar, coated his tongue, a dead weight in his mouth.

"Steve," he said sharply, a tinge of exasperation.

He scrambled up from the bed, kicking the sheets and blankets out of the way, reaching to where he'd thrown his clothes the night before. He slipped on his shirt and socks, ignored his jeans, and stepped on wobbly legs into the living room. He didn't look at Hopper as he pulled on his jacket and boots.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the set of Billy's jaw, the way his hands trembled into fists at his sides to the same beat Steve's heart trembled in his chest.

"Let's go," Hopper said, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder and steering him out the door. Over his shoulder to Billy, he said, "We're going to talk about this later. Don't leave. I'll be back."

Numbly, he walked down the steps to Hopper's truck, climbing in with unsteady hands on the door. His heart shook in his chest as Hopper got in, pulling a half-burned cigarette from the visor and shoving it between his lips.

Steve stared out the window at Billy, standing on the top step, bare skin red from the bite of late winter's chill and a haunted look on his

face.

Silence followed them halfway into town when Hopper pulled onto the side of the road, hands on the steering wheel. Steve shrunk in the seat, tilting his body toward the door. Anxiety, colder than ice, twisted in his stomach.

“I’m not going to ask because I don’t wanna know,” Hopper said, and Steve chanced a glance at him from the corner of his eye. He didn’t look angry; he didn’t look at Steve at all, eyes focused on the road in front of them. “But you need to be careful.”

He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “It wasn’t—”

Hopper lifted a hand abruptly. “I don’t wanna *know*. You don’t need to say anything to me, but you need to be careful. After the shit with his father, you need to be careful. This town isn’t forgiving. We both know that. Tread very carefully on this. Do not—” He cut himself off with a noise in his throat, turning his gaze on Steve. “Be careful, alright? Just be careful.”

Steve said nothing and nodded, turning to look out the window, arms curling around himself.

When Hopper dropped him off at his house and his mother enveloped him in a tight hug, shoulders wracking with sobs, and his father stood angrily and awkwardly to the side, demanding to know where he’d been, he remembered that he hadn’t asked Billy about his hair or the trailer or gotten an answer to where he’d been for almost a month—all he’d done was sleep next to Billy and wonder what his skin tasted like.

Notes for the Chapter:

This whole chapter can be summed up into "celoica had to rewatch S1 just to catch glimpses of Hopper's trailer and she still doesn't know what it looks like in its entirety" and "Steve has gay feelings and doesn't know what to call them".

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy stifled a yawn with his hand. The bags under his eyes looked like bruises. Steve bit his lip. “I should get going.”

“I’m not kicking you out.”

“You’re tired.”

“Then sleep with me.”

Steve swallowed hard, tongue gritty and dry and having nothing to do with the weed. He glanced between the bed and Billy. School was in session and Jonathan would have waited a half an hour for him. He should go, make up some bullshit excuse, and hope that was enough to smooth over Nancy’s worrying.

“Yeah,” he said instead. “Okay.”

*"I'll cut my soul in pieces,
And breathe half into you,"*

—Heinrich Heine, from Book of Songs; “I Don’t Believe in Heaven,”

Two weeks later, his parents were gone again, suitcases repacked and the keys of the Bimmer hanging on the hook, off limits to Steve until they came back. He was grounded for two months. Punishment, his father had said. It’s about responsibility and accountability, his mom had said, teary-eyed as she fussed with his collar and straightened his hair.

They left anyway, off on another trip to do business and meet up with friends they hadn’t seen in a month. Steve sat in the living room for five minutes, watching the seconds tick by on the clock above the fireplace. He had made plans with Jonathan for a ride to school. He

needed to call him, tell him he was sick and couldn't make it. There was homework in his backpack, untouched, that needed to be done. There was a pile of laundry on his bedroom floor that needed washed.

The clock's hands struck 7:17 and he bolted from the couch, snatching the keys off the hook as he jammed his feet into his boots. The front door slammed behind him.

Like coming from a fever-dream, the second night spent by Billy's side had haunted him. His thoughts were rolled into Billy and the trailer, the warmth of his skin in the morning light, the short hair and the heavy look in his eye when they laid side by side.

A wound that wouldn't heal, it itched in his brain, a missing piece floating just out of his reach even as he rooted for it, hands grasping and pulling, over-analyzing every second passed in Billy's presence.

He dreamed of him, too. On center stage in the forest, gummy-snow beneath their bare feet, sometimes he died in front of Steve, withering away or bleeding out from eyes and nose and mouth. In one, he'd been missing his tongue. In another, he had no eyes. Each time, he disappeared when Steve reached to touch him with shaky hands, the barest hint of icy-hot pain biting at his fingertips before Billy was gone and he was awake.

Left gasping for breath, shaking through another night terror, he'd lay alone in his bed and wonder what Billy was doing until he fell asleep or the sun came up—whichever came first. Most of the time it was the latter. Even Eleven had asked him if he was sleeping, shy and delicate in her own way, even as she stared burr holes into the side of his skull like she could climb in if she willed it enough.

It terrified him, a cold dread in the pit of his stomach. If she cracked open his skull, what would she find? Would she know? What would she see?

Billy, probably. Billy in his morning glory, sleepy-soft and delicate. Billy in all his rage, readying to haul off and hit Steve for his smart mouth. Billy, drunk off his ass and sleeping in Steve's bed.

Nancy hadn't infected him like this, even when he'd been so deeply in love with her he could feel it in his teeth.

Then again, maybe he hadn't been that in love with her. Love like that didn't fade. Love like that, obsessive and pulling you apart from the inside out, wasn't supposed to disappear in a cloud of betrayal and half-bitter acceptance.

He drove to Billy's place, the radio on low, fingers drumming anxiously on the wheel. The drive was winding and long, Steve hesitating at each hidden entrance until he remembered which one Billy had turned into. Too busy paying attention to the stretch of shadows and light playing on Billy's face and too tired to focus on anything but what was in the car, it took longer than expected, and by the time his car bumped along to the lake, it was an hour later.

Billy's car was parked next to the stairs, snow cleared off the windshield. He could hear the booming thunder of too much bass vibrating from the trailer as he climbed out of his car. Icy snow, leftover from the last of the winter chill, crunched beneath his boots. His heart hammered in his chest, thudding in his ears.

The door opened and Billy stepped out. Shirtless, jeans slung low on his hips, silver chain wrapped about his neck. A joint hung from his lips.

Steve shoved his hands into his pockets, stopping at the bottom of the steps. "Isn't it a little early for that?"

Billy raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"Don't you have work?"

"Night shift."

"Ah." He rocked back on his heels, head bobbing in a nod. An awkward silence drifted between them. "You gonna invite me in?"

Billy leaned his shoulder against the door frame. He held his joint between two fingers. It smelled good, strong and skunky. "Depends."

"On what?"

"Did Hopper follow you?"

Steve sucked in a shallow breath. "No. He won't." He paused, eyes stuck on the shape of Billy's mouth and the smudging of blue-purple under his eyes. On impulse, he plucked the joint from Billy's fingers and tucked it between his own lips. It tasted as good as it smelled. "My parents are out of town."

Billy's eyes narrowed. He didn't reach for the joint. "Is that why you're here?"

Steve shook his head.

"Then why?"

Steve shrugged. It felt like a lie, indifference that he shouldn't expose Billy to. "You're more fun than school."

He studied Steve for a long moment and then stepped out of the way. "You're rolling the next one," he said.

Inside, the music was deafening. There was a paint-splattered boom box on a new-to-Billy-old-to-the-world, rickety-looking table next to the TV. Steve could see it vibrate on the blush carpet. He kicked off his boots carelessly and marched across the room, turning the volume down low.

Puffing on the joint, he adjusted the volume until it was somewhere between earsplitting and background noise. He stripped off his coat and tossed it over the couch. When he looked up, Billy was holding a mug in one hand and wearing an unreadable expression.

Self-consciousness struck like thunder through his spine. "What?" Steve asked, pulling the joint from his mouth. It was going to his head already, the world going soft and fuzzy around the edges. Billy looked soft around the edges.

"You're making yourself right at home."

"You drank a bottle of liquor that cost a hundred dollars. You can

share your weed."

Billy squinted. "You're fucking with me."

His mouth twitched. "I'd never fuck with you."

"You're fucking with me right now."

"Am not."

"Seriously? A hundred?"

Steve grinned. "You still owe me for that."

Billy made a face. "I'm sharing my weed. Isn't that enough?"

"Is this apology pot?" Steve asked, holding up the joint. The end burned to ash.

"Yeah," Billy said, nose scrunching up, "it is, so don't waste it."

Steve tucked the joint between Billy's lips, the pads of his fingers brushing against the warm skin of his mouth. Like a sacrament, maybe. Like when the priest offered the body of Christ.

Billy took it, lips cinching. "I didn't think I'd see you around here again," he said after an inhale.

Hot smoke blew in Steve's face. He wanted to lean forward and seal his lips over Billy's. The thought didn't unsettle him as much as it should have. Waste not, want not, or something like that that his mother always said.

"Why not?"

"Hopper didn't scare the shit out of you?"

"Not really."

"Two weeks and you didn't come back. I think he did."

"I was grounded."

Billy barked out a laugh. "Grounded?"

Steve shot him an annoyed look. "My parents were pissed, alright? They took the car and sent me to my room. It wasn't like I could sneak out without my dad noticing an entire set of keys missing."

Billy didn't say anything. He stepped around Steve to snuff out the burned-out joint carefully into a glass ashtray. A set of roach clips sat next to them. He sat down at the couch, balancing his mug on his knee. Steve stared. The silence felt like failure.

"Listen," he said, when it got to be too much, the absence of words too much to handle, "it's not like I know what we're doing."

Billy turned a look on him, as unreadable as before. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are we—?" *Friends*. Acquaintances who share beds and beat each other that one time.

Billy snorted. "What? *Friends*?"

Steve swallowed down the ache rising in his chest and looked away. Shame bubbled in his throat. Stupid. He was stupid. They weren't friends. He and Nancy and Jonathan were friends. Tommy had been his friend. Dustin and the dweebs were his friends, even Eleven, in all her psychic glory.

Billy wasn't his friend. Billy was the kid who almost caved his head in because his step-sister was next to a black kid. Billy was a fuck up, the town loser.

He wasn't his friend.

Still, it burned on the way down. Whatever had happened between them didn't matter to Billy but it mattered to Steve. It shouldn't have. There were a hundred reasons why, but they still didn't measure up to the way Billy had wormed his way under his skin.

He dreamed about him, in the forest. In all his dreams before, Steve was alone, stuck inside the solitude of his own nightmarish hellscape. Billy was with him now, buried deep in his subconscious, sometimes

dying and sometimes not.

Not even Nancy and the kids could touch that place inside of him.

He cleared his throat. "No," he said, voice strained to his own ears, "I guess we're not."

The look on Billy's face was the same as before; unreadable. It felt like looking at one of those paintings Nancy was so fond of. He didn't understand it but, deep down, he knew it was profound in some way.

"I didn't think you'd want to be my friend," Billy said finally.

"Oh. I mean..." Steve's face scrunched up. "You *did* beat the shit out of me."

"Yeah," Billy said stiffly. He took a long drink from his mug. "I know. I did. People don't wanna be friends with me after that."

Steve licked his lips, skirting around the makeshift coffee table to sit down next to Billy. "Are you sorry?"

"Kinda. Sometimes."

He mulled it over. It was as close to an *I'm sorry* as he was ever going to get. "I can live with that."

The look Billy gave him was disbelieving. He set his mug down. There were no coasters on the table. "Seriously?"

"I'm friends with Nancy," he said with a shrug. "Getting knocked around wasn't the worst thing."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't have to."

"So, what," he said, "we're friends now?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Billy laughed, soft, almost delicately. "You're a real piece of work, Harrington."

It stung, again, cutting something deep and fragile inside Steve's chest. Maybe it was the weed. Maybe Billy had laced it with something to make him stupid and open.

"You don't have to be my friend," he mumbled. He pressed his hands flat to his thighs and wished he had something to do with them.

"Who said I didn't wanna be your friend?"

"You. Right now."

The corner of his mouth lifted into a hint of a smirk. "You're sensitive."

"Don't be a dick."

"I'm always a dick."

"Try to be less of one."

"Can't promise that," he said, leaning forward to snatch a baggie of bud off the table. He handed it over with a pair of dubious looking scissors. "Your turn to roll."

It was insane. Everything about it was insane. Sitting next to Billy on his couch on a Thursday morning was *insane*.

He took the scissors and busted up the bud. He licked his fingers and then the paper, rolling the joint carefully. He handed it to Billy.

Inspecting it with tired eyes, he grinned, slapping a hand on Steve's knee. "I'm impressed."

He jumped at the contact, lips parting around a *watch it*. Billy's hand stayed on his leg, fingers spread and curved around his thigh. Steve stared, mouth going dry. The heat from his palm soaked through his jeans.

Had Billy always been that closed? Had he always smelled like that—sweat and weed, something earthy that tasted heavy on his tongue when he breathed through his mouth.

He swallowed. "Tommy tell you that?" he asked, voice rough. He grabbed for the mug Billy had left on the table, ignoring the arched brow he got in response. It burned going down.

"Said you rolled better than anyone else."

"Tommy's a flatterer."

"Tommy's a moron."

"Not always."

Billy made a face. "Most of the time."

"You're being a dick."

"I thought you didn't like Tommy."

Steve pursed his lips, setting the mug against his knee. "I like Tommy just fine," he said. He paused. "Most of the time. He just won't grow up."

"Is that what happened to King Steve?" Billy asked. He tucked the joint between his lips and plucked a lighter off the table, lighting the end. Musky smoke curled from his mouth as he exhaled. "You grew up?"

Steve watched his mouth, the shape of his lips as he breathed out. "We all have to sometime."

Billy licked his lower lip. "That chick make you grow up?"

"Nancy?"

"The dead one."

Steve breathed out through his nose and settled back against the couch. He took the joint from Billy's fingers. "Barb. Yeah, maybe," he said. "You can't be a kid when you've seen that."

"I read about it, y'know," Billy said. He leaned back, head turned, chin resting on his shoulder as he watched Steve puff on the joint. "In

the paper. They said she was poisoned. Didn't mention you at all."

Steve cut him a look and blew smoke in his face. Billy didn't flinch. "You reading up on me, Billy?" he asked, lazy and slow. His mouth had gone dry again.

"Yeah, and it didn't say a single fucking thing about Steve Harrington."

"They made us sign papers. Me and Nancy and—" He sucked in a fresh breath and handed Billy the joint. If he spilled the beans on Joyce and Hopper and the kids, Max included, he'd be fucked. "Some other people involved."

Billy frowned. "So they just shut you up?"

"Yep," Steve said, emphasizing the *P* with a pop of his lips.

"So why'd it come out?"

"Nancy," he said, immediately and stupidly, head lolling to the side to look at Billy. He was close—closer?— enough to touch. If he leaned forward, their noses would bump. "Barb's parents were gonna sell their house to find her. Nance felt bad and Jonathan wanted to help."

He watched as Billy leaned forward to gently snuff out the joint, flicking off the cherry. He settled back into his former position. He felt closer again. "Sounds fucked, man."

"Real fucked," he said with a nod.

"I meant that your girlfriend left you for the weirdo."

Steve cut him a hard look. "He's not a weirdo."

"She still left you."

"Are you *trying* to make me mad?"

Billy grinned, white teeth and heavy eyes. "Is it working?"

"Yeah," Steve said, shifting in his seat to turn, biting on the inside of his lip. "It's working. Stop it or I'll hit you."

"Want your ass kicked again?"

"No wonder you don't have any friends."

"O-oh," he sang, smile sharpening. "That was rude, Harrington. Didn't your mom teach you any manners?"

"Do you even have a mom?"

Billy paused. Tension swelled between them as his eyes narrowed, and Steve knew he'd misstepped. He sucked in a breath and held it until his lungs burned. Billy looked at him, red eyes steady and pointed, and then he sighed, tension bleeding away as quickly as it came.

"What'd Max tell you?"

Steve stared, dumb and slow. "Nothing, really. She calls you a jackass a lot."

He smiled thinly and pulled away, back pressed tight to the couch. Steve felt the loss down to his bones. His fingertips twitched, the urge to reach out and touch his skin wrapping around his throat.

"My mom's real fucking crazy. Max met her. She broke my dad's windshield when him and Susan got married," Billy said, looking at the mug on the table. He smiled a little wider, adding, "And slashed the fucking tires and wrote *whore* on Susan's."

It took a long minute for Steve to come up with anything useful. He landed on, "Well, that explains a lot."

Billy barked on a laugh, bitter and high. "You calling me crazy?"

"My mom still makes me soup when I'm sick," he said, *when she's around* staying curled on his tongue.

Billy shot him a dirty look. "Good for you."

"That's not—" He sighed and shoved his elbow into the couch to sit upright. "You know what I mean." He paused, squinting at Billy. "Right?"

"Yeah. I get what you mean."

"Good. Good," he repeated with a nod. If there were an Olympic sport for saying the wrong thing, he would win it. Gold medal in the shape of Billy's fist, bringing home the glory to his entire family by putting his foot in his mouth. "I'm sorry she's crazy."

Glancing at him from the corner of his eye, Billy kissed his teeth. "Yeah. Me too."

Steve scooted to the edge of the couch. Without asking, he handed the lukewarm coffee to Billy and clipped one of the roaches in the ashtray, lighting it up and taking another hit. Billy traded the clip for the mug, and they sipped coffee and puffed down until their fingertips and lips burned hot.

Billy stifled a yawn with his hand. The bags under his eyes looked deeper. Steve bit his lip. "I should get going."

"I'm not kicking you out."

"You're tired."

"Then sleep with me."

Steve swallowed hard, tongue gritty and dry and having nothing to do with the weed. He glanced between the bed and Billy. School was in session and Jonathan would have waited a half an hour for him. He should go, make up some bullshit excuse, and hope that was enough to smooth over Nancy's worrying.

"Yeah," he said instead. "Okay."

They abandoned the couch for the bedroom, stripping off their shirts and socks. Steve watched the curve of Billy's spine as he bent down, grabbing a pair of basketball shorts and tossing them at him. He pretended not to look when Billy pushed his jeans—no underwear, of course, *of fucking course*—off his hips. It wasn't the first time Steve

had seen him naked, but the showers lacked intimacy, with coarse soap and the scent of sweat off teenage boys wafting in the steam.

In Billy's bedroom, the morning light slanting through half-open blinds, everything felt intimate. Steve clutched the shorts in his hands and watched Billy. From the strong line of his shoulders, speckled with freckles, to the line of his spine and the flare of his hips, the curve of his ass and the careful dusting of dark blond hair across his thighs.

He was golden everywhere.

Something hot snaked its way through his belly, burrowing its way into his spine and slithering across his nerves. When Billy turned, Steve looked away, shucking his own jeans and briefs quickly and yanking on the shorts. He crawled onto sheets that smelled of Billy. Billy climbed in next to him, on his side, facing him.

They stared at each other in the silence, heart beats and breaths stretching between them. Eyes locked, Steve slipped his hand across the sheets and the small space between them. His fingers danced across the naked skin of Billy's stomach, smoothing up the ridges of his abs to his side, hand settling there.

Billy closed his eyes, mouth curled into a smile.

For the first time in weeks, Steve remembered nothing of his dreams.

He woke with a start, limbs tangled with Billy's and his cock, hard and hot in the thin fabric of his borrowed shorts, pressed up against Billy's hip.

Cool blue eyes peeked at him through half-closed lids. Steve cringed, twisting away from Billy. "Jesus, I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

The sheets twisted around his legs, catching on Billy's as Steve shuffled away to the other side of the bed. Billy watched him passively, propping his chin on the back of his hand. Steve

swallowed, heart hammering in his head, traitorous cock still achingly hard. He yanked the edge of the sheet over his lap, half-sitting.

He shoved a hand through his hair, smoothing down twisted cowlicks, sucking in a shallow breath. When he finally chanced a glance at Billy, he was grinning, shoulders hitching in silent laughter.

Steve scowled. "Don't laugh!"

"You're freaking out."

"My dick—" He pressed his lips into a thin line, red inching up his bare chest. Tongue tied had never been a good look on him. It hadn't been a look he'd worn since he'd been fresh-faced and popping a hard on every time the wind blew in just the right direction.

"It's not a big deal," Billy said, reaching an arm above his head, palm pressed flat to the wall as he stretched. Steve watched the smooth slide of muscles under his skin, the shift of his collarbones as he flexed.

Beneath the press of his palm, his dick twitched. Steve almost smacked it, angry shame biting at his skin with another flush of colour. "Is this you trying to make me feel better?"

"I've seen your dick before," Billy said, twisting his shoulder, fingers splayed against the wall. "It's not that weird."

That—made sense, in a convoluted way. Steve swallowed, knuckles pressed against the inside of his thigh. They'd seen each other naked in the showers, fogged up by the steam and Billy always getting too close just to bother him. He'd never snapped a damp towel at his flank, but Steve wouldn't put it past him.

Steve chewed on his lip and looked away, the silence falling heavy between them. Words hung on his tongue, as heavy as the silence, but he couldn't spit them out. They clogged up behind his teeth and stuck to the roof of his mouth. In bed, half naked, cock aching beneath his palm—it was nothing new. Billy laying next to him, sheet low on his hips, lips turned up into a smile, was new.

It was unfathomable. Everything about the situation was impossible to wrap his mind around, and yet he was there, and not for the first time.

Billy moved beside him. When he looked over, he was close, a hand settling dangerously close to touching his thigh. "You gonna take care of that?"

Steve choked on nothing but his own saliva, a pained look pulling at his face. "What?"

Billy raised an eyebrow, smooth as ice. "Aren't," he said, enunciating each word with arrogant care, "you going to take care of that?"

Beneath his palm, his cock twitched. He glanced at the bedroom door, where he could see the open door of the bathroom. An awkward hobble to the shower wasn't something his ego could suffer.

Billy sighed heavily and shoved the sheets off his hips. Steve's mouth went dry, eye drawn to the bulge in his sweats.

He'd been hard against Billy's hip and Billy was hard, too.

How had he missed that?

Billy pushed his sweatpants down his hips, golden blond hair catching on the waistband, a thatch above the base of his cock. Steve stared, frozen, as Billy's cock—thick and long, foreskin obscuring the tip—slipped free of his sweats. It curved toward his belly, a slight lean to the right.

He watched, tongue tied again, tongue dry enough to trap words there. *What the fuck* and *this isn't right* and *Jesus, you're gorgeous, you know* that stuck on his tongue like superglue.

Smoothness gone out the window, all he could do was *look*, heat pooling low in his belly.

It was wrong, or something like that. Something about it wasn't right, bordering toward sinful. The kind of sin that Father Andrew talked about in church and Steve ignored. It was something not quite believable, but then everything about Billy, from his car to his cut

hair to the way Hopper seemed to know him, wasn't quite believable.

"Man, you just gonna stare?" Billy asked as he wrapped a hand around himself, blunt fingers circling right around the base of his cock. He stroked up. The foreskin slid with his hand, bunching at the head and pulling back when he stroked down. His fingers squeezed the base.

In bed with Billy, jerking himself off, looking at Steve like—

Steve turned off his thoughts. He shoved the sheet to the side, snapping the waistband of his borrowed shorts down his thighs and to his knees. His cock hung heavy, blood-flushed and a bead of precome swelling at the tip, between his legs. Billy watched him, eyes dark, the corner of his lip caught between his teeth as he gave his cock a rough drag-squeeze-twist of his wrist.

He curled onto his side, fingers skating down the flat plane of his own stomach, slipping through his pubic hair. Even his own touch left trails of molten want in their path. Wrapping a hand around his cock, he thumbed at the tip, hips twitching into the touch.

He watched Billy and Billy watched him. The obscene sound of skin on skin filled the air, mingling in with the catch of Billy's breath, an orchestra that played along with his own.

Beside him, Billy was close enough that Steve could feel his hot breath on his skin, fanning over his lips and cheeks, warming him from the outside in to the same beat that his hand worked over his dick.

Pupils lust-blown and flicking between Steve's face and his hand, Billy was a sight. In the sunlight, hair a mess, fingers flexing over his cock to thumb down foreskin and drag over the head, he looked like something straight out of a fantasy. Pink flushed across his sun-kissed skin, skating down his chest, ruddying his cock.

The muscles of his arms flexed, shifting with each stroke up and down. Entranced, Steve watched, as enthralled with his hands as he was Billy's face.

Heat and want and lust wrapped themselves around Steve's throat, choking out tiny gasping sounds as they danced down his spine, spreading out across his belly with each jerk of his hand. His balls ached, heavy and tight, desperate for release. His chest ached with it. Blood pounded in his ears, eyes fixed on Billy.

The world melted away, until there was only Billy and him, the bedroom nothing more than background scenery.

Billy moved, thigh sliding across the sheets to nudge his knee against Steve's. Electricity sparked where they touched, pure want stuttering across Steve's nerves, and he swallowed down a moan, fingers squeezing the base of his cock until it throbbed.

He didn't want it to end. He didn't want it to be over so soon.

If he touched his chest, thumbed and pinched at his nipples, nail rough against the edge, would Billy care? Convincing girls to touch his nipples and press their teeth to them always ended with a look of uncertainty, and, in Laurie's case, outright laughter.

He dug his teeth into his lip and skated a hand up his chest. Catching his nipple between his forefinger and thumb, he pinched, tweaking the flesh until it borderline hurt, a good ache that barrel down to his stomach.

He moaned, low and throaty, precome spilling from the head of his cock.

Billy's eyes went hazy and dark, teeth dug into his lip as he watched Steve touch himself. His knuckles tightened on his cock, the cap glistening, fluid dripping down and disappearing with a stroke of his hand.

The sounds were lewd; damp breath and the wet glide of skin, the hard gasp and crack of Steve's toes when they curl. Billy swallowed down a moan: he shoved his knuckles against his teeth to muffle the sounds, and Steve wanted to tell him to stop, to take it away, just so he can *hear* him—

He came first, a hot rush spilling over his fingers. It ripped through

him, liquid fire snapping free of his belly and washing over his spine. It prickled across his skull, washing over him, eyes half closed and lips parted around a strangled moan.

He watched Billy and Billy watched him, knuckles still jammed to his lips. The head of his cock disappeared into his fist, foreskin nudged back to reveal the dripping tip, and when come dripped from the head, thick and white and smoothing the way, Billy whined, a dark, hunted noise that sent a skittering shiver up Steve's spine.

Steve turned his head into the pillow, face obscured and one eye on Billy. His palm, coated in come, curled uselessly against his thigh, cock laying beside it. He breathed heavily, caught the scent and taste of Billy on his pillow against his tongue, and basked in the warm afterglow.

Billy panted, heaving breaths he swallowed down as he dropped his hand from his lips, eyes wild and bright, cheeks flushed pink. His knuckles were white with come.

They watched each other, eyes heavy and hazy with pleasure, and when Steve opened his mouth to say something, Billy reached out, smearing come across Steve's bare hip, mouth twitched up into a delirious smile.

He glanced down at his hip, to the streaks of come left by Billy's fingers, to where Billy's palm, a hot, big brand on his skin, lay next to his hand and softening cock on his thigh.

Steve licked his lips, mind hazy and full, clogged up with orgasm and the scent of Billy in his head. He reached out, unabashed, and pressed his come-slick hand to Billy's chest, panting his palm across his skin. His heart beat hard in his rib cage, sternum moving with each breath he took.

He said nothing as he settled his hand on Billy's side, fingers fitting into the delicate grooves of his ribs, painting the last of his spunk across his golden skin.

Notes for the Chapter:

I suck at updating this on time. I think that's what we really learned through me writing fic for the first time in forever. I took a couple weeks off to figure out where I wanted to even go with this story, but I figured it out. It won't take a half a month to update the next chapter, I promise.

I've never met a single chronic user who didn't over-smoke just for the hell of it. You can't get higher than a certain point, but they keep smoking it anyway. Teenagers are well-known for being this type of dumb, so Steve and Billy are, too.

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

“What’s your poison, then?”

Steve thought back to the bottles he’d pilfered through in the past twelve months when sleep evaded him and said, “Benzos.”

The look Billy gave him was hard, eyebrows drawn together like he couldn’t figure it out. “Who’s selling you those?” he asked.

There was an edge in his voice Steve couldn’t place.

He grinned. It felt as sharp as Billy’s did, pointed enough to draw blood. “We all have our secrets, Billy. Are you going to tell me what happened with your dad?”

Notes for the Chapter:

For the darling [Vic](#), who put up with me repeatedly saying "I'm going to finish writing tonight" for, like, two months.

He almost managed to get to town before the panic set in.

The winding road that led to Hawkins kept his mind busy until the road smoothed out to nothing but flat and straight for another mile. The trees lining the road felt like soldiers lining him up for the death march. They taunted him, hanging overhead, afternoon shadows slashing through the windshield through the branches.

Steve pulled the car over onto the side of the road, a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. He breathed deeply, pulling warm breath into his lungs that did nothing to dull the ice working its way through his belly and up his throat. It spread like a disease, like something cut free from the Upside Down itself, until it walled off is breathing way and he sucked in air like a suffocating man.

He closed his eyes, fingers clenched so tight they hurt, and counted back from ten.

Ten.

Billy's hair, all dirty and gold and the fewest hints of copper mixed in.

Nine.

Billy's teeth, white against his barely-there tan, something Steve thought might just be leftover from years spent baking in the California sun.

Eight.

Billy's cock, fat and plump and blood-flushed, thick in the curl of his knuckles.

Seven.

His own come smeared across Billy's hip, a streak of evidence Billy hadn't bothered to wash off his chest even when Steve had scrambled to leave.

Six.

Billy's face when Steve had stuttered on an excuse.

Steve dropped his head forward, letting out a half-hysterical laugh, tight and high. He felt elated on terror, blood rushing in his skull and heart thumping heavy in his chest. It beat so hard he swore it would leap from his throat and run away.

Five. Four.

The twist in Billy's body as he'd sat up, the soft *yeah, whatever*, the fucked up way he hadn't even looked at Steve when Steve had looked back at him.

Three.

Billy's skin against faded and striped sheets.

Two.

Steve's hand on his skin, pale and thick-knuckled, fitting perfectly into the grooves of Billy's ribs.

One.

He hiccuped on a laugh and looked up. Asphalt and snow-lined trees stretched out before him. White spots danced in front of his eyes. He shook them away.

How had he gotten *here*—on the road out or into Hawkins, leaving Billy fucking *Hargrove's* trailer and bed?

How had he managed to slip into bed with him in the first place?

How had he been friendly with him at all?

A few months ago, Steve swore he hated him. Billy was everything that he hated. One time, maybe a little before he'd fallen for Nancy, he would have called Billy his best friend. They would have wrestled over dominance, over king of the castle that was Hawkins High, and they would have made friendly on the court against Bellmont High because everyone hated losing. They would have danced around each other, spat aggression and cheap beer into each other's mouths, bruised their knuckles on walls and each other's chins when they fought and made up in the same out.

He would have played the game. Billy had been beckoning him onto the playing field from the moment they'd met; take me on, let me take you on, keep up with me, I'll be king and I'll take your crown and you'll take it back.

He would never have ended up in Billy's bed in the middle of nowhere.

His hands slipped from the wheel, curling uselessly in his lap. The Bimer rumbled quietly underneath him. His dad would kill him for idling. His dad would kill him for driving at all.

He'd kill him for being in Billy's bed.

Fingers twitching in his lap, Steve closed his eyes, head leaning back against the headrest.

Part of him wanted to turn around and crawl back into Billy's mismatched sheets. It was the same part of him that had been walking around with Billy in his brain, tucked deep inside, since the night he'd found him in his car.

It wasn't *Steve*. It was some other boy—man—who walked around thinking about sunlight on skin and if he could feel the scrape of stubble on his chin if he kissed him. Some other man thought about kissing Billy Hargrove. Some other man spent hours wondering if it was the same as kissing a girl.

(Was he supposed to lead? Was he supposed to let Billy? Was he allowed to touch Billy's hair? Would he freak out if he touched his knee, his thigh, slipped his hand under his shirt to cop a feel of something that wasn't there?)

Some other man spent the day in Billy's bed, comfortable in intimacy he hadn't known existed. Some other man had forgotten about Nancy Wheeler and heartbreak, the underbelly of the beast that so few knew existed.

Some other man hadn't turned away when Billy had tried to kiss him.

His fist clenched, nails cutting into the flesh of his palm. He slammed it against the wheel once, then twice, then a third time. The impact shook through his arm, vibrating right into his skull as he screwed his eyes shut tighter. They ached.

By the time he mustered up the courage to open his eyes, the sun had dipped further in the sky.

Of course Nancy and Jonathan were waiting for him when he pulled into the driveway.

For a moment, Steve thought about pulling out and driving off—maybe all the way to Mexico, or even so far up north he could pet a

polar bear—but then Nancy smiled brightly and waved at him, and the moment was lost.

“What are you doing here?” he asked as he stepped out of the car. He thumbed his keys. He hasn't been able to sit still since he'd started his way back into town.

Nancy stepped away from Jonathan's Pinto and toward him. The smile was still fixed on her face, but up close it didn't reach her eyes. They stayed fixed on Steve, all-knowing, like they could break past his skull and unspool his thoughts.

Behind her, Jonathan didn't smile. His mouth was a tight line, grim.

Nancy touched his arm. “You weren't at school today.”

Her hand was a light weight against the crook of his elbow, a parody of comfort. He stared at her fingers, at the perfect curved nails and bare fingers.

He thought of Billy's hands. Bile spiked in his mouth, burning acrid on his tongue.

“Yeah,” he said and then nothing else.

Nancy frowned. Behind her, Jonathan tensed.

“We were worried about you.”

“I'm fine.”

“Steve, you're not fine.”

He tried for a smile, reassuring and comforting. Jonathan winced and pushed off the car. His mouth trembled, but he forced the attempt at a smile to remain.

“Man, did you forget I was supposed to pick you up?”

“No.”

Jonathan's eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Steve,” Nancy said, hand pressing firmer against his arm. “What’s going on?”

He shook her off, violently. Her touch burned. Just looking at her, Jonathan so close to her looking so fucking *concerned* it, burned him all the way down to his bones, shook him right at his core.

“I’m *fine*,” he bit out, taking a step back when she raised her hand again to touch him.

Her frown deepened, lines bracketing her face, an edge of something more hunted in her eyes. “You don’t look fine. You haven’t been acting fine.”

Steve glanced between her and Jonathan. “What is this? Some kind of intervention?”

Jonathan’s lips thinned and he raised both hands, palms spread. “We’re both worried about you. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to cry. Part of him wanted to turn and walk away, and the another more primal part of him wanted to hit something.

Lately. He hadn’t been himself *lately*.

He hadn’t been himself since last year, when monsters came up from the ground and spores clogged up his throat, and a little psychic girl told him that his thoughts were very loud.

Shaking his head, he decided on laughter, hollow and bitter. “I’m *fine*,” he said again.

“You don’t sound fine,” Jonathan said.

“You’ve been skipping school,” Nancy added, and it sounded more like an accusation than anything else she had said. “Bailing on us. Dustin even said you canceled on him.”

“Maybe I’m busy.”

Jonathan tilted his head. "With what?"

Steve glared at him. "You're not my only fucking friends, y'know."

"That's not what I meant—"

"Like who?" Jonathan asked, voice as sharp as knife's blade. "Billy Hargrove?"

Mouth snapping shut, Nancy tipped her head back, crease deepening between her brows. Steve felt the blood drain from his face, pale pallor slipping underneath his cheeks. He wondered if the shame hung around his neck like a collar, thick enough for them both to see.

"Hargrove?"

"We were hanging out a while ago and he saw Billy walking down the street," Jonathan said, nodding at Steve. Steve gritted his teeth. "Chased after him and didn't come back for a whi—"

"Would you *shut the fuck up*?" Steve spat, taking two steps forward until he crowded up in Jonathan's space, slamming the palms of his hands against Jonathan's shoulders.

He stumbled back, grabbing onto Steve's wrist to catch himself. He yanked it from Jonathan's grip, glaring.

"Steve! What the hell!"

Wedging herself between them, Nancy raised her hands up. Steve's shoulders rose with his hackles, eyes darting between the two of them, from the wind licking over Nancy's curls and the flush of blood across Jonathan's cheeks. His chest burned with the pressure of awareness, of his hands making contact with Jonathan like it was something he was capable of doing.

The last time, he'd barely bruised Jonathan's face.

Sucking in a breath, he took a step back, shoulders still hitched to his ears, jaw set in frustration. Nancy looked at him like he'd grown two heads.

Maybe he had.

“Steve,” she breathed, stricken. Horror danced across her eyes. Steve felt the guilt like a bolt of lightening, twisting into anger between one breath and the next.

“*What.*”

“Why did you—?” She shook her head slowly, reaching a hand back to press against Jonathan's arm like she was trying to assure herself he was still whole. “How do you know Billy?”

Steve rubbed between his brows with his thumb, looking away and licking his lips. “He beat the shit out of me. Remember?”

“Is that all?”

He shot another glare at her, eyes half-covered with his hand. His head pounded, a throb that stretched across the base of his skull. “What does it matter?”

“He hurt you.”

“So did you.”

Nancy froze, eyes widening a fraction.

“Hey,” Jonathan said, shaking out of whatever stupor he had been in, as he took a step around Nancy, “that's not fair.”

“Yeah? Fuck you, Jonathan. I thought we were friends. Friends don't fuck each other's girls.”

“*Steve,*” Nancy hissed, fury and a plead all wrapped in one.

Jonathan's mouth snapped shut with an audible *clack* of his teeth, jaw tight. He stared for a moment and then said, “That's not what happened.”

Feeling vindicated, Steve asked, “Did you or did you not fuck her?”

It was Nancy who hit him. A *slap* echoed in his head, his cheek

burning a second later, and his head ached from the force of the blow. Taking two jerky steps back, he brought his hand up to touch his stringing cheek. When he pressed down, the flesh ached, nerves alight.

“Fuck you,” he said softly. “Get the fuck off my lawn.”

Nancy touched her hand—the one that had hit him—to her mouth and stared at him. “I didn't mean to—”

“Which part didn't you get?” Steve cut her off, hand dropping from his cheek. He rubbed his tongue against the inside of his cheek. That ached, too. “The *fuck* or the *you*?”

“You don't need to be an asshole,” Jonathan said.

“You can fuck off, too.”

“*Steve.*”

“Christ,” Jonathan said, disgust raking across his words as his lips twisted. He looked Steve up and down, eyes lingering on the way his fingers clenched into a fist at his side. “You need to get your shit together.”

“She just fucking hit me and I'm the one who needs to get my shit together?”

The fury wasn't there. The shame and guilt, the twisted feeling of frustration that settled itself inside his chest whenever he thought too hard about the way Nancy and Jonathan's fingers linked together so soon after the Halloween party, had fluttered away.

Numb, he watched the tip of Jonathan's tongue prod against the inside of his cheek, jaw tight. For a moment, Steve thought he would argue, and then his hand settled on Nancy's shoulder, fingers clenched on her shoulder. “We should go,” he said to her, eyes stuck on Steve as he spoke.

Nancy watched him with solemn eyes, wavering between the nudge of Jonathan's hand on her shoulder and Steve standing before her. She looked away and said, “When you're done being an asshole,

Steve, you can come talk to us.”

He watched them climb into Jonathan's car. He closed his eyes, shoving his hands deeply into his pockets and counted back from ten.

When he opened them, he was alone. The wind rustled over his hair, scuffing his cheeks and nose red. His toes were already going numb. Shadows crawled across the snow left on the ground, creeping toward him with selfish, spindly hands; they reached for him like something from a hellish nightmare.

The wind whistled. Cored out, he stared down the empty street.

In the distance, he heard the faint whine of a Demo-dog.

That night, he dug into a bottle of his dad's expensive imported whisky and fell asleep on the couch, thoughts full of Billy and the crack of pain across his cheek.

He woke in the dream-forest and unhappily sober. Dead branches hung over head, gummy snow burned away to crisp grass and rough patches of rock and dirt.

Eleven stood in front of him, wearing red and black plaid sleep pants and a threadbare shirt that swallowed her whole, hanging off her delicate shoulders. Steve had seen it once before, when Hopper had dropped Eleven off at the Byer's house.

“Are you real?” he asked.

She tilted her head, eyes dark and solemn in that unnerving way of hers. Studying him, testing him. He felt nothing when she prodded at his mind and skimmed his thoughts off the surface like a pebble grazing water.

Finally, she nodded. “Mike said you and Nancy had a fight.”

Steve looked away, shame bubbling in the surface. It wasn't *fair*. Shame shouldn't be something that he felt in a dream, in the forest, the one made of nightmares that swallowed him and Billy whole night after night.

“Did you?” she asked, voice a soft drop in the ocean.

He licked his lips and crossed his arms over his stomach, defensive.
“Maybe.”

“What happened?”

Dustin was brash. He was aggressive and demanding, getting up in Steve’s face when he demanded answers, voice raising until it cracked. Even Mike was loud when he wanted an answer, anger boiling over until he was poking chests and pushing onto his toes.

Max was sly, watching from a distance, words barbed. Lucas got to the point quick, short and succinct, sharper than Max’s words.

Eleven was soft. Soft all over, in her hair to her worn clothes, in the words that fell from her mouth like dandelion fluff. Soft and stubborn; Steve had seen her best Hopper in a staring contest, eyes determined and chin tipped.

It was a dangerous combination.

“She hit me. I said things I shouldn’t have,” Steve admitted.

Eleven looked thoughtful. “Did you say you’re sorry?”

“No.”

“Did she?”

Steve shook his head.

She sighed. “Friends don’t hurt friends.”

His mouth wobbled, an unwilling smile he tried to fight. “It’s not that simple.”

Eleven stepped forward until their arms brushed. Her head tipped back. She barely grazed Steve’s shoulder. “Why not?”

“Adults are complicated.”

Nose wrinkling, she said, “You’re not adults.”

Steve looked away, lips flattening into a line to fight the laugh. It wasn't funny. Nothing about it was funny or amusing or any other fifty-cent-word-of-the-day-calendar phrase he could think of. He laughed all the same, little noises muffled behind his teeth.

He focused on a hollowed-out tree to his left, branches gnarled like his grandmother's hands.

"Yeah," he agreed. "We aren't. It makes it more complicated."

"Why?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"You don't answer many."

"Does your dad?" he asked, looking down at her.

"No," she said, and frowned, sullen. "You could if you wanted to."

"I can't."

"Why?"

Why. Why, why, why, why. It rang in his head like a warning bell. To her, it was simple. Steve had learned quickly that Eleven had a child's mind, her view on the world narrowed down to *how* and *why* and *explain* when she didn't understand. His mind hadn't been so uncomplicated since he'd been young.

Maybe it had never been uncomplicated.

"It's complicated," he said lamely.

"Why?"

"Is that your favourite word?"

She scowled at him, wrinkles puckering at the skin beside her eyes. "You sound like Dad," she said.

"I hope not," he muttered, and stepped away from her, scanning the decrepit forest around them. It was strangely comforting, even empty

of leaves and snow and Billy.

Billy. God. *God*. Where was he? Hiding behind the trees? Stuck inside one like he'd found him a few nights before, the bark grown around him until there were only flashes of translucent skin and tangled blond hair? Was he inside the Earth, trapped and choking on dirt that never ended when Steve broke his own nails digging him out?

Eleven touched his shoulder and he flinched, jerking away from her. She frowned, soft and as delicate as everything else about her.

"Is it him?" she asked.

He frowned in return. "Him who?"

"Max's brother."

Steve froze.

"He thinks about you," she said, nonchalantly.

If he had blood in his body, it would drain from his face. "What does he think?" he asked carefully.

Eleven shrugged. "He wants to be your friend."

The relief swelled and crashed into him as quickly as the panic had. "Oh."

"He hurt you."

Steve scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah," he said.

"He hurt Max."

"I know."

"I don't like him."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Eleven nodded and reached for him again, slow, like he were a startled doe, and patted him awkwardly on the shoulder. "You should

say sorry to Nancy.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.”

She smiled, soft and gentle. “Goodnight, Steve.”

Between one heartbeat and the next, she was gone, leaving Steve alone in the forest. Snow, soft and gummy, began to drift down from the empty sky, catching in his hair and clinging to his cheeks.

School passed in a haze. His classes blended together until he was taking the wrong textbook into Chemistry and left his half-done homework in his car.

He walked in a daze through the halls, ignoring the way Jonathan refused to look at him and the way Nancy turned away when she caught his eye. He sat alone at lunch, chain-smoking cigarettes he'd nicked off Tommy's coat when he was in the shower and staring into the sky as if it had all the answers.

It didn't. It never did. He kept staring anyway.

When it rained, it poured; the sun had been out for days, melting away the snow and drying out the ground.

Dustin filled his answering machine with bellowing *hell-os* and sullen *I know you're ignoring mes* that he deleted as quickly as they came. It felt bad, like he was breaking the law or an unwritten rule in one of Dustin's games, but it felt worse to consider picking up the phone.

It was worse at night. Shadows crept through the slats of his half-closed curtains and the wind rattled the world outside. Monsters of his imagination trailed after him with hungry mouths and knotted hands, drinking him down until Steve woke in a cold sweat, shaking through the despair and death and whatever torture had befallen Billy in his sleep.

Sometimes he dreamed of Billy and golden skin, the forest evaporating to nothing around them it mismatched sheets. The howl of Demo-dogs settled into breathy sighs and heated groans, and when Billy leaned close to kiss him, Steve let him this time, until his lips

and chin burned from the scrape of stubble and his hands groped to touch more skin.

Slipping a Valium or two from his mom's medicine cabinet felt like the most righteous crime he had committed in a week. The bottle ran low by the next Tuesday and Steve wondered how much shit he was in for when his mom reached for them finally and found them gone.

“Harrington.”

Steve blinked. “You're not the pizza guy,” he said dumbly, tongue loosening enough to make a coherent sentence.

Steve had left him alone after the afternoon in the trailer. Head too jumbled with his own thoughts and Nancy's accusatory bullshit, seeking out Billy had been all Steve had wanted. Like any good addict, he tried to cut himself off at the source.

Clearly, it didn't work when the addiction stood upright and knew his address.

Billy just raised his eyebrows. A joint was tucked behind his ear, neatly rolled and still damp at the tip. “Yeah, no shit. You busy?”

He stared at him numbly, stupidly, tongue fitting back into his mouth and refusing to budge.

There was a party at Carol's. Tommy had invited him in passing, hesitation despite the surefire way he'd slapped him on the shoulder after practice. Steve knew all of his moods, and the twitch in his eyebrow gave him away.

Carol's older brother was supposed to be getting them a keg. He wondered if Nancy and Jonathan would be there, if they would dance and laugh and have a good time, while Steve sulked in his hollow house.

He wondered if they even thought about him when he wasn't there. It seemed easy, the way they fell into each other without him running to catch up. Jonathan carried Nancy's books to class and kissed her cheek before he left for his own; they held hands and shared lunch.

They weren't burdened by Steve Harrington, the ex-Great King Steve, hovering in the background, waiting for any scrap of affection to be tossed his way.

More than a little bitter, he shook his head. "No. Why?"

Billy smiled like a hyena sounded, teeth and viciousness and charm. "It's Friday. I'm taking you out."

Frowning, he raked his eyes over Billy—shirt popped at the collar under a faded leather jacket, earrings in, a silver chain wrapped around his throat. Lips red and bitten, smelling strongly of cologne; his hair, for how short it was, was carefully styled.

Steve hadn't seen him so put together since before the night at the Byers' house.

Fuck the pizza.

"Okay," he said and moved to the side to let Billy into the house. Billy stepped in smoothly, lips turned up into a hint of a grin. "Give me, like, ten minutes."

Bolting up the stairs, taking them two at a time, he stripped off his sweater and stumbled out of his jeans, mind in a frantic whirl as he tugged open his closet and was greeted with shirts askew and worn pants a tangled heap at the bottom.

He dug through the mess, holding shirts up to his bare chest and glancing in the mirror before tossing them over his shoulder, letting them land where they wanted. White noise buzzed in his brain, overtaking all the thoughts as tangled as his old clothes that had consumed him and left him a walking zombie.

Billy appeared and the thoughts disappeared; Nancy and Jonathan, the emptiness of his big house, the shaking fear that gripped his throat when he thought too hard about what they'd done in Billy's bed. It all disappeared.

He slipped into a pair of clean jeans and tucked a white shirt into his waistband. He grabbed the jacket hanging off the back of his door and paused in front of the mirror, licking his fingertips and

smoothing down his hair, fingers stalling in his hair when he caught sight of his own eyes.

His reflection looked back at him, a little wild, a little disordered, a little too chaotic for how he'd felt before Billy had knocked on the door. From the hands working through his hair, to the wrinkles in his shirt, to the jacket tucked under his arm. It all looked like someone else.

Shaking out of his stupor, he fixed his hair and darted out of the room.

He took the stairs two at a time, heart heavy in his chest, and when he landed at the bottom, he was almost surprised to still find Billy there, looking cool and calm and collected, grin fixed on his face as Steve stopped in front of him.

Steve hadn't asked where they were going—it hadn't even mattered—but the way Billy looked him over, slow and appreciative, in the same way his mom looked over a piece of artwork she was itching to buy, made him think he'd done good enough.

In the car, Billy turned down the radio and pulled out of the driveway. David Bowie played in the background, soft and subtle over the rumble of the Camaro. It filled in the silent gaps Steve didn't know how to, engulfed by Billy being close enough to touch again, his thoughts shifting gears from *he's here* to *he's fucking here*.

You are now leaving Hawkins; come back soon! flashed in the window. Steve finally asked, "Where are we going?"

"I thought you would never ask."

Steve snorted and slumped in his seat. "I'm asking now."

"You ever been to the Brass Rail?"

"That strip club?" Steve shifted, half-turning in his seat, eyes narrowed. "Are you taking me to a *strip club*?"

Billy cracked a grin and glanced at Steve. "It sounds like fun."

He stared, dumbfounded. It was Billy. Everything about the night was so painfully Billy.

The Brass Rail was one of those mythical places that most teenage boys in Hawkins talked about but had never seen the inside of. Pitted next to a motel, a burger joint, a truck stop and a twenty-four hour diner, Steve had seen the outside, lights off and *CLOSED* sign turned on the front door, more times than he could count.

According to Carol, Leslie Berkley, a senior when Steve had been a freshman, worked there. She was as mythical as the place itself.

“How are we supposed to get in?”

“I know a guy.

“From where?” he asked, skeptical.

“Work.”

It had been one of those things Steve had meant to ask but hadn’t. He asked.

Billy shrugged. “South Bend.”

Steve frowned. “That’s an hour away.”

“It pays well,” Billy said. He shrugged again.

“What do you do?”

“Aren’t you just full of questions tonight.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

His mouth twitched, a half smile. “I’m always an ass.”

“Seriously,” Steve said, settling back into the seat. “Where do you work?”

“Does it matter?”

That gave Steve pause. “Are you, like, a drug dealer or something?”

he asked, eyebrows drawing together in a frown.

Billy laughed. “Jesus, *no*.” He cut Steve a glance, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Why? You want something?”

It felt like he was mocking him, like the idea of Steve touching something harder than the liquor in the back of his dad’s bar was *laughable*. It felt like a challenge. Everything with Billy did.

“Maybe,” he blustered. He looked out the passenger window to avoid Billy’s eye. When they passed under a street lamp, Steve could see Billy’s face in the reflection of the window, eyes heavy and on him, mouth still turned up at the corners.

“You want coke?” he asked, smile in his words. “Or bennies? You look like an upper kinda guy.”

Steve bit the inside of his cheek. He took the bait. “I’m not,” he admitted, still looking out the window. He imagined his mother’s empty pill bottle sitting in the palm of his upturned hand. “Makes my heart feel like it’s going to climb out of my chest.”

Billy whistled, shrill. “Damn, Steve,” he said. Steve saw him glance at him in the reflection of the window. “I didn’t think you were the type.”

He looked at him then, raising an eyebrow with all the bravado he didn’t feel. Face to face with Billy, the red tinge of nervousness ebbed away.

“I like what I like,” Steve said simply.

“You don’t look the type.”

“You said that.”

“I meant it.”

“What’s your poison, then?”

Steve thought back to the bottles he’d pilfered through in the past twelve months when sleep evaded him and said, “Benzos.”

The look Billy gave him was hard, eyebrows drawn together like he couldn't figure it out. "Who's selling you those?" he asked.

There was an edge in his voice Steve couldn't place.

He grinned. It felt as sharp as Billy's did, pointed enough to draw blood. "We all have our secrets, Billy. Are you going to tell me what happened with your dad?"

Silence filled the small space between them. On the outside, the Camaro felt larger than life, in-your-face and loud enough to shriek *aggressive* from across the school parking lot. In it, crammed into the tiny space where Billy took up too much air, it felt tiny.

Billy didn't look at him. His shoulders were stiff, eyes on the road ahead of them. A white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, Steve imagined his skin splitting open, unraveling like a seam, from the force.

Sorry hung heavily on his tongue, coiled between saliva and teeth. It refused to come out. It quivered and slipped back into his throat.

"You like to play with fire, don't'cha?" Billy asked, finally, the silence broken by the ragged bite of his words.

Maybe. Maybe he did. Before Steve didn't. He liked to stay on top, lounge on his golden throne and control the situation. Being this close to Billy wasn't playing with fire; it *was* fire. Steve might as well dump gasoline on him and strike a match.

I don't like him, Eleven had said.

He should care. He should *care*.

Billy would have knocked Lucas out, taken a chunk out of Steve's brain along with his pride, if Max hadn't stopped him. He'd seen Billy vicious and wild, eyes a little crazy, mouth a little cruel; he'd seen it when he'd been on the receiving end of his fists and when he fought with Carl Anderson at Michelle's birthday party.

Nancy didn't like him. Jonathan didn't like him. Will hadn't said a word about Billy Hargrove, but Steve didn't doubt that he hated him

on principal.

He shouldn't care.

He *shouldn't*.

"Maybe," Steve admitted, and cracked another smile. It felt weak, but when Billy glanced at him, blue eyes stuck on his mouth, it felt worth it. "You got a problem with that?"

"No-o-pe."

He laughed and shook his head, warmth blooming in his chest.

Dimly lit, brightened by flashes of light pointed at the stage and behind the bar, the Brass Rail looked like something out of a movie. A dirty, dingy movie, if he looked too closely at the floor and whatever was hidden beneath the flashing lights. Inspecting the dirty floor of a strip club wasn't high on his priority list, and he was just thankful that his shoes had soles that were easy to clean.

It smelled of cheap cigarettes and cheaper perfume, cloying desperation lining the front row.

Beside him at the bar, Billy stood, smooth like butter and nursing a whiskey sour like that wasn't something Steve's dad drank after a fight with his mom. In the stifling heat of the club, he wore his leather jacket. A line of sweat clung to his hairline.

Steve thought about pushing his jacket off, stripping it away for him, let his fingers stroke across Billy's skin. He squashed it down firmly and swallowed a mouthful of cheap beer.

A blonde in a lamé gold bikini swung around the pole.

Billy's shoulder knocked against his. "You look like you're gonna stroke out."

Steve snorted and nudged him back, elbow prodding against Billy's ribs. "I do not."

“You ever been this close to this many tits before?”

“I’m not a virgin.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

“I’m not into gangbangs, either.”

Billy’s eyes lit up. “Didn’t say you were, either. What do you got against gangbangs?”

Absurdity thrummed through Steve as he cracked a grin and shook his head, the lip of his bottle pressed against his mouth. The blonde in the lamé held herself up off the ground by her thighs, ankles crossed as she spun on the pole. Someone threw a ten at her. Another whistled and shouted.

Steve looked back at Billy. “It’s just...y’know. Not what I expected.”

“Oh?”

“It’s kinda—gross,” he said, and laughed, licking at his lower lip. “Really fucking gross.”

Billy’s eyes dipped to his mouth. “Not having fun?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“This ain’t your scene, Steven?”

Steve coughed on his beer and choked on a laugh. “Did you just call me *Steven*? Not even my nana calls me that.”

Billy grinned, crooked this time. “Isn’t that your name?”

“Isn’t your name William?”

“Right on one, Steven.”

He laughed again and set his half-finished beer down on the bar, elbow leaned against the polished edge. Bracing the heel of his palm, fingers spread, against the top, he leaned toward him. Billy’s smile was infectious, the edge of delight so pointed it cut down into Steve’s

core as easily as his words did.

“Who calls you William?”

Around the lip of his own bottle, Billy said, “No one.”

“What about me? Can I call you William?”

Billy paused, eyes roving over Steve's face for so long his lips parted around an apology. If overstepped or misstepped, there was always a good sucker punch in it for Steve. Billy had a nasty left hook, knuckles made of iron, and Steve had nursed the bruises and cuts he'd left on his face for weeks after their scuffle on the kitchen floor.

There was a scar on his nose, an indent of flesh picked out, a reminder of Billy's hands on him.

“What do I get to call you?” Billy asked finally, the tip of his tongue, pink and damp, touching the corner of his mouth as he leaned forward. He rested his arm on the bar, a mirror image of Steve's. His fingertips grazed his, the barest hint of skin-on-skin.

Sparkling across his flesh, the point of fingertip to fingertip enough to sizzle heat across his palm and over his arm, racing its way to his belly. It settled there, heavy, head, thicker than tar, weighing Steve down like an anchor.

“I don't know. What do you want to call me?”

“What did she call you?”

His brain paused, skittering in twenty directions before settling on what Billy meant. He blinked. “I don't know. Nothing. My name.”

“Sweetheart? Darling?”

Steve shook his head. Billy took a step forward, invading Steve's personal space. He leaned forward until Steve could feel his breath on his lips.

“Baby?”

Swallowing, his eyes dipped, watching the shape of Billy's mouth as it curled, soft around the edges. It was the smile he'd given Steve in his bed—slow and lazy, the kind that promised all sorts of toe-curling things he wasn't supposed to think about. Slow and lazy, full of promise, with a stellar execution because Steve had been there when he'd touched himself.

“No,” Steve said, voice ragged. The tips of his fingers twitched against Billy's. Want, molasses thick, clogged up his veins, filling his head with sweet desire.

If he reached out, he could touch Billy. He could fit his hand in the front of his shirt and pull him close, slant his mouth over his until he sucked the air from his lungs and left Billy as breathless as Steve had been since the moment he'd knocked on his door.

Billy's fingers slid over his knuckles. Steve didn't look down.

Voice dropping an octave, Billy asked, “Do I get to call you baby?”

He trembled. The question shook him down to his core, left his brain slipping into slow motion as he took in the shape of Billy's mouth as he spoke, the white flash of teeth under flickering lights.

Steve sucked in a breath. “Did you bring me here just for this?”

“This what?” he asked, fingers stroking smoothly over Steve's knuckles again.

“You know what.”

“Say it. Spell it out for me.”

It wasn't a challenge. Steve had seen Billy in all his glory, on fire, head so full of himself he'd hip-chucked Steve right into the floor and then dragged him up to prove a point. At the Byers' house, when it had been him and Billy in the front yard, on the floor when Billy had been poised over him, spitting blood and taunts.

He'd been there. He'd egged him on, distracted him from the kids and what was hidden in the fridge.

This wasn't a challenge.

Billy was closer now, fingers curling around Steve's wrist, thumb stroking over the jut of bone, obscene in touch. Steve leaned into him. His heart kicked up, desire twisting in his belly, nipping at the skin Billy touched. His fingers danced up his arm, leaving wildfires in their path.

He was close enough to kiss, close enough that if Steve leaned in their lips would touch. A redo on before, when he'd turned away and things had gone from lazy and intimate in Billy's bed to cold and distant. A redo, a first time, something to commit to his memory that wasn't the careful, casual touches they'd traded since Steve had found him in his car.

Steve licked his lips.

"Do you wanna call me baby?"

Billy's eyes lit up.

"I—"

"Hey, fags, the tits are on stage."

A brick wall slammed down, a powerful *thud* that Steve could feel down to his bones. Expression souring, eyes darkening, Billy turned, pulling away from Steve, and snapped at the man sitting two seats from them at the bar.

"Why don't you say that to my fucking face, shit-weasel."

The man turned on his stool, one boot-clad foot hitting the floor. His gut hung over his jeans, white shirt tucked into the waistband and straining. One hand stayed curled loosely around his glass, froth sticking to the corner of his mouth. "Hey, *fags*," the man said, loud and exaggerated, enunciating each word so clearly that others turned their heads, "the tits are on stage."

The line of Billy's body tensed, going from loose to tight with the flick of a switch. The tension bled down his back. He watched Billy's thighs tense under his jeans. He tossed his head back and laughed,

louder than the man had spoken. Manic, hysterical, forced to the point of hurting Steve's ears.

People turned in their seats and glanced at them. The bartender paused. Two dancers glanced between themselves and then back to Billy.

Unease drifted over Steve, thin like snowflakes, clinging to his skin and sloping down his spine.

“Billy—”

He stepped away from Steve, lips stretched over his teeth in a tight smile. “Look at you, you fat fuck, calling me a fag. You got the best cock-sucking lips I’ve ever seen. You want a taste?”

“Billy,” Steve hissed, taking two steps forward, grabbing his upper arm. “Let it go. Let’s go.”

He shrugged Steve off easily. Ignoring him, he jerked his chin toward the man. The man looked between the two of them, fingers tight around his glass. “C’mon, old man. You wanted my attention. You got it.”

The man clicked his tongue. “Jerry,” he said, waving his glass at the bartender as he turned in his seat, facing the back of the bar. His foot came up again, resting on the stool, an air of casual indifference sliding over his face. “Gimme another one.”

Steve reached out for Billy once more and Billy hauled off.

The world dulled out, lights dimming around Steve as he watched.

Three steps forward and his fist collided with the man’s cheek, knocking him clean off the stool. Billy went down with him, the man’s hands scrambling for purchase and grabbing hold of the front of his shirt. Landing heavily, Billy rocked back on his knees, a smooth movement that looked so graceful it had to have been choreographed, one hand fisted around the collar of the man’s shirt as he yanked up, pulling him into the motion of his knuckles coming down on his face.

The *crunch* was sickening. Dread knotted tightly in Steve's belly, and he watched in a daze as blood spilled over Billy's knuckles and sprayed across the grimy floor. The man struggled beneath him. Billy snarled, lips peeled back from his teeth, and hit him again.

The bartender—Jerry—dropped his towel and took a step backward, hands raised in defense. The blonde-in-lamé dashed off stage. Three women in a cluster backed away slowly.

Steve stared.

Barreling past Steve, elbow slamming against his ribs and knocking him off-kilter, a man in a red shirt and crew cut twisted his fingers in the collar of Billy's shirt, yanking him back, balled fist coming down across his cheek.

Steve jerked, body moving of its own accord, and then his own fist was pulling back and connecting with Crew Cut's head. Pain burst through his hand, ricocheting up his arm. It vibrated behind his eyes, bright light that blinded everything. He swore and stepped back. When his vision blurred back together, Billy had rolled off White Shirt, was halfway to standing in front of Crew Cut and Crew Cut's fist was coming alarmingly close to Steve's face.

He turned in time for knuckles to catch his cheek, pain glaring across his skin, the impact bright enough to shine white light behind his eyes.

All Hell broke loose. Billy moved and Crew Cut followed, colliding into each other with all the force of David and Goliath. White Shirt struggled to his feet, swaying for a moment like the whole world was tilting on its axis, and lunged, knocking Steve back against the bar, solid wood digging into his spine. White Shirt's breath was beer-hot, ghosting over his face as he bit out, "You piece of arrogant shit."

Steve grunted, eyes screwed shut as he shoved the heel of his palm into White Shirt's face, knee drawing up neatly between his spread legs. A beat and then a groan, guttural and tinged with misery. Steve shoved White Shirt away, putting distance between with a side-step, eyes frantically searching for Billy in the chaos.

Others had joined in, a collision of bodies scattered across the dim room. The music continued to play in the background, lights flickering artfully. The girls had fled, stage left hauntingly empty while others huddled together in groups far from the scuffle, murmuring words of *should someone call the cops?* between themselves.

Pushing the hair from his eyes, he pulled in a desperate breath, eyes skipping from face to face, catching sight of Billy's eyes, bright and wild, cheeks flushed and hair a mess, knuckles bloodying themselves further as he pinned Crew Cut to the bar by the throat, Jerry the bartender backed into the shelves, hands up.

"Billy," he called, dodging two men wrestling poorly, hand outstretched. "Jesus, Billy, fucking *stop!*"

If Billy heard him at all, he made no indication. His fist swung back, knuckles so bloody Steve felt his stomach crawl into his throat, and arched down, landing across Crew Cut's face—nose, cheeks, forehead. Something small and white fell from the man's mouth, blood spitting across the dark wood of the bar.

"Billy, Billy, *Billy.*" It was a chant, louder with each step toward him, until Steve can get his hand around his shoulder and yanked. Billy didn't budge, hand tightening around Crew Cut's neck. He choked, an awful wet noise that sounded as close to a death rattle as Steve could imagine.

Steve breathed shallowly, fingers dug so tightly into Billy's arm it burned. "Please. *Please*, Billy. Stop it. Please just stop."

The vulnerability crept into his mouth like locusts, eating out the bits of himself he held together with tape. Dismay and the bloody edge of fear leaked out, across the floor, off his fingers and into Billy's skin. There was a shake in Steve's jaw, in the delicate lines of his bones, a tremble that burrowed its way into Billy's arm.

Billy stopped, a twitch running along the arm Steve touched. His fingers spasmed, curling and straightening, where it sat in the air, hovering on a downward stroke across Crew Cut's face. He gurgled again, as awful and wet as before, and when Steve pulled on Billy's

arm, gentle and insistent, Billy went easily, unfolding from his hunched position over the man and stepping away. When Steve pulled again, a tug meant to urge the stubbornness of horses back to water, Billy went like the most docile of foals.

The crowd pressed in around them, a jumble of emotional voices and elbows, the shout of *someone should really call the fucking cops, man*. Steve weaved between people, dodging sloshing drinks and stares, Billy in tow.

They didn't speak until they were on the sidewalk, three steps from the door and ten from the car. Steve dropped his hand, fingers curling into his palm from memory, turned on his heel and punched Billy square in the jaw.

His head snapped back and he staggered, cupping his face with his hands. He groaned, hand covering his mouth, eyes narrowed into slits.

Steve stared, a tremour crawling up his spine.

"There's blood on your face," Steve said numbly. He touched his own mouth. His fingers came back dark and slick with blood.

Billy threw back his head and laughed. Red stained his teeth. "You gonna still kiss me, darling?"

He moved, quickly, grabbing at Billy's shoulders and stepping him back against the wall. Billy's shoulders slammed against the rough brick and he groaned, deep in his chest, spine arching him into Steve's body.

They met in a clash of teeth and lips, in the taste of rust. Steve clutched at his shoulders, desperate. Billy gripped the front of his jacket, pulling hard enough that his shoulders ached from the force.

The prickly stubble brushing against the delicate skin of Steve's mouth was all at once unfamiliar and nostalgic, a bite on his skin soothed away at the softness of Billy's lips. The motions were the same—nips and love bites, carefully choreographed head tilts, slicked by shared saliva and the bone-deep want. The feeling was different, a

heat so demanding it burned through him as they kissed.

Billy rubbed against his thigh, the thick line of his cock solid through his jeans. The heat was unbearable, chafing friction and awkward angles. Steve grunted and kicked at Billy's ankle until he spread his legs, Steve's thigh slotting between them. Billy groaned, hips working against him as frantically as they kissed, desperate and starved.

Steve shuddered at the thought of touching him, of rubbing his palms down the golden planes of his thighs and wrapping his hands around Billy's cock, sucking it into his mouth and feeling Billy twitch on his tongue.

They kissed, frantic and wet, no finesse. Steve licked behind Billy's teeth. Billy bit his lip and sucked on his tongue. When Steve wound a hand into the hair at Billy's nape and pulled, Billy whined, broken and wanting.

"Jesus, fuck," Billy said against his mouth, "do that again."

Steve kissed him again, fingers twisting in his hair and pulling. Billy groaned and arched against him, fingers scrambling down his shirt to grab at his belt.

Belt undone and fly ripped down, Billy curled his fingers in the hair at the root of Steve's cock and pulled.

Steve hissed, shouting a strangled yell into Billy's mouth. His cock twitched, white pain flashing before his eyes and settled into arousal. Billy's hot palm dragged over the length of Steve's cock, fingertips curling around the plumping head, drawing him from the tangle of clothes and into the open air. Steve kissed him, sloppy and deep, teeth catching on Billy's lower lip when Billy's fingers laced around his cock, thumb playing along the scar below the head.

His hips twitched restlessly, hand cupping the back of Billy's skull, teeth pressed against his lip to stutter a moan.

The position was awkward: Billy rutted against his thigh, subtle jerks and shifts of his hips, rough hand wedged too tightly around Steve's dick to do anything other than frustrate. He kissed Billy

anyway, earnest and filthy, sucking the air from his lungs and committing the taste of him to memory. He tugged Billy's hair to hear him grunt, fingers squeezing Steve's cock when he did. Billy gave back in tenfold, the pad of his thumb circling over and stroking, petting across the wetting head of Steve's cock until his thighs twitched and he groaned.

He should be bothered. Billy's hand was huge and tougher than any girl's. The stubble scraped his skin, the thigh was too thick, the hair too coarse, his body too hard. Somewhere, buried in Steve's brain, he knew *now* was the moment to pull away and panic.

It turned him on. The rubbed off scent of Billy's cologne, the rumble in his chest when Steve shifted his thigh and eased the pressure on his denim-trapped cock only to rub against it with a new angle, the decidedly masculine way Billy felt in his arms. His hard cock, so hot Steve swore he could feel it through their jeans, pressed against his leg was enough to set Steve aflame.

He groaned, frustrated, and pulled back. Billy tucked his fingers down to stroke against Steve's balls and smiled. Steve swallowed. He could still taste Billy in his teeth.

"I want your cock in my mouth," he said, rusty. His lips were swollen, baby pink against a fading gold, and when he licked his lower lip, Steve wanted to lean forward and chase the taste of his saliva.

They moved, slowly, shifting from position, legs disengaging enough to turn Billy away from the club's wall and Steve against it. Steve leaned his head back against the brick wall, fingers uncurling from their death grip on Billy. He settled them on his shoulders, thumbs stroking down the column of his neck.

Billy's eyes were hazy, lust-blown and heady, teeth digging into his bottom lip. His hand, stilled on Steve's cock when they'd turned, withdrew from between them and settled on Steve's hip, fingers spread wide enough to trail his thumb below Steve's belly button.

He closed his eyes and swallows, tongue gone sandpaper dry. He felt electric and alive, a hot-wire burning from both ends that led back to

Billy and his hands and mouth. He sucked in a breath, head tipping back, as Billy leaned forward, skimming his lips down to the hollow of Steve's throat. He licked over Steve's Adam's apple. Steve kept his eyes closed.

And then Billy was gone, hand dropping from his hip. Steve opened his eyes and glanced down. Halfway to his knees, his other hand drawing up to curl around Steve's thigh, his mouth was curved knowingly, eyes gone dreamy as he licked across the tip of Steve's cock.

Steve's hips twitched and he groaned, fingers slipping into Billy's hair. Wet heat, the slick glide of tongue, the curl of knuckles to stroke what Billy couldn't fit in his mouth. Billy looked up at him, eyes as heavy as the heat burning through Steve's belly, and Steve looked down.

Like a sculpture Steve had seen once in a museum—the man on his knees, drugged with worship, in front of the gentle god.

Steve wasn't gentle. His fingers twisted in Billy's hair, close to the scalp, tugging in deliberate pulls when Billy dipped his tongue into the slit of his cock, hand ease down to the base as he sucked more into his mouth. Unbearable heat, swallowing him whole, licking down to the thatch of hair, trailing off with an obscene, wet smack to suck kisses down the length of him and across his balls.

Billy's mouth was holy ground, burning desecration into Steve's skin. Biting his lip hard enough to bleed, he smothered the broken, wanting sounds, biting them back into his throat while Billy's lips stretched over his cock again, baby pink gone cherry red, saliva dripping from one corner.

Blowjobs weren't new to Steve. He'd had plenty of them. The kind that sucked the life right from you, leaving you drowsy and stupid, mind basking in the afterglow that knocked you down, left you reaching for something to hold onto even after it was gone. Billy's mouth was worse, somehow. It burned him, slippery suction that left him rocking onto his toes with every up-bob, eyes locked on Steve's even when he gagged, stubborn with his mouth stuffed.

It was intimate. On his knees, eyes lifted up, Billy was open, split down the middle and parted for Steve to see.

His fingers cradled the back of Billy's skull, the weight of it—had it ever been this good with a girl? With anyone? With Nancy?—floating somewhere out of reach as the heat in his stomach pulled taut, wrung so tightly he swore he felt his bones cracked. Biting off a keening, broken noise, Steve came, spilling across Billy's tongue, dripping down his throat.

Billy held him through it, nails biting into the tender skin of Steve's thigh, eyes half-lidded as his tongue curled around his cock. He licked up the mess, greedy, squeezing the last drop of spunk onto his tongue in a show for Steve that had his knees shaking. He kissed the softening crown and tucked Steve back into his jeans.

Slumped back against the wall, Steve sucked in deep breaths, heart kicking up with the rush of endorphins. Mind clouded with the haze of orgasm, he watched dumbly as Billy zipped his jeans back up and stood.

The outline of his cock was obvious, stiff and uncomfortable looking, but when Steve reached for him, fingertips barely snagging on his fly, he shook his head and reached for him, voice fucked-out and chin still damp, and said, "Just kiss me. Christ. Steve."

Steve kissed him without hesitation, hands smoothing down to his shoulders, thumbs stroking his neck. He kissed him deeply, the frantic edge simmering low in his brain, slow and with a hint of sweet. Buried in Billy's spit was his own spunk, sharp and bitter, familiar in the way it was for curious teenage boys.

Billy leaned into him, hands flat to his stomach, there hard line of his dick nudging against Steve's hip when they moved.

Steve kissed Billy until the taste was gone, until it was nothing but slick heat and Billy, until the clouds had parted in his brain, until he realized they were leaning against the front of a strip club.

His fingers flexed on Billy's neck. Billy sucked in a breath, muscles going tense. Steve bent his head and kissed his neck, heart beating

solidly in his chest.

There was a bloody and beaten man in the club because of Billy.

“Let’s go,” he murmured, honey-thick, dragging the tip of his nose over Billy’s neck. He smelled good. The club and the man, the blood on Billy’s knuckles, faded to static.

Steve pulled away, spine straightening. His hands stayed on Billy. When Billy looked at him, his eyes were clear, hungry as they searched over Steve’s face.

“Take me home. I want you,” he said, soft, quiet like a secret. “I’ve wanted you for so goddamn long.”

Billy didn’t speak, eyes still roaming. He stepped away. It felt like a loss. Steve followed, taking a step toward him, hands still on him.

“You gotta stop touching me,” Billy said, finally, when they’d stood still for what felt like an eternity. His words caught in his throat; he sounded breathless. “I can’t fucking think straight when you’re touching me.”

Flexing his fingers, he nodded, willing his hands to lift from Billy’s shoulders and the skin-on-skin touch. “Take me home.”

“Say it again.”

“I want you.”

“Again.”

“I want you.”

Steve closed his eyes, the tatters of his pride slipping away.

“Please.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Adult life is hard. You can find me on Tumblr @
[celoica](#).

9. Chapter 9

Summary for the Chapter:

“What do you think I want?”

Steve scoffed. “That’s the point. I don’t know.”

“You could try telling me.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, leaning his temple against the window, “because you’re such a big talker.”

“You never acted like you cared,” Billy said, and it sounded so defensive Steve had to swallow down a laugh.

“*I* never acted like *I* cared?” he repeated, lifting his head away from the window. He stared at Billy. Billy stared out the windshield. “You think I invite just anyone to come into my house? You think I drive into the middle of fucking nowhere to sleep in just anyone’s bed? You think I jerk off with all my friends?”

They drove back through Hawkins in silence.

Steve fidgeted. He twisted his fingers around his knuckles, pressing his closed palms between his thighs, trying to find something to do that wasn’t staring at Billy.

They’d pulled away quickly, Billy only pausing long enough to adjust his cock in his jeans, a movement that had Steve’s hands freezing as he redid his belt. Billy’s long fingers had squeezed, thumb stroking down the trapped length of him, and Steve’s mouth had gone dry.

He could drop to his knees, work open Billy’s jeans like Billy had done to him and press his tongue to Billy’s cock. He wanted to suck him down, roll the taste across his tongue, know all the intimate places that Billy’s body held. There were places Steve hadn’t even seen. In the showers at school, with his eyes trained forward, never

taking in the expanse of wet skin that bumped against him as Billy leaned close, he hadn't looked. On the court, lying next to him in a shared bed, the heat between them the only thing warming the icy cavern his chest had become—he'd never looked.

Looking meant something. Looking meant something about him, about Billy, about the way Steve craved his touch like an addict craved the needle.

Billy came to a stop at a red light, one hand curled loosely around the steering wheel, thumb stroking over the worn leather like a caress. He was jealous of it, the touch of Billy's hand on something that wasn't his skin.

Feeling stupid, he looked away and out the window. Darkness swallowed the scene, the soft glow from the lights of the gas station barely stretching out enough to reach the Camaro. He watched the lights as the light turned green and the car moved.

The frantic energy had ebbed away. Sated and sleepy, the mix of orgasm and alcohol that hit him harder than Valium, he wanted to curl around the scent of Billy and sleep for ten hours. He wanted to crawl himself inside of Billy, bury himself in his skin and sweat and the weight of his arms circling around his shoulders, and sleep, warm and content. Safe.

He wanted to strip off Billy's clothes for him, push him down on the creaky twin bed in his bedroom, and rut up against him, until Billy was frantic again, mouth hard on Steve's, fingers leaving nail marks and bruises in the shape of his hands.

He wanted to be wanted, desperately, by Billy. He wanted Billy to swallow him whole, pin him down like a delicate butterfly, and take him apart with his teeth and tongue.

Steve bit his lip and looked at Billy, sneaking a glance. Billy was looking at him, one hand curled around his own knee. He looked hesitant. He looked uncertain.

"What?" Billy asked.

“Nothing.”

“Not nothing. Doesn’t look like nothing.” When Steve didn’t say anything, he raised a brow. “You freaking out?”

Steve shot him a dry look. “Do I look like I’m freaking out?”

“Yes.”

Steve’s eyes hardened, narrowing. “You’re not freaking out.”

Billy looked surprised. He blinked, the grim set of his mouth smoothing out. “I’ve done this before,” he said, and switched hands on the steering wheel, the one closest to Steve reaching forward to turn up the heat. “It’s pretty fucking obvious, isn’t it?”

“Not to me.”

“How is it—?” Billy cut himself off, laughing. “You’re a real piece of work, Harrington. Have you ever even been outta this shit town?”

Steve frowned, wedging his hands underneath his thighs. He felt cold, despite the heat turned up all the way. He felt like he was going to shake under Billy’s laugh, under the pressure of his eyes as he turned to glance at him from the road.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’m gay, Steve,” he said, and the words were loud enough to break apart an iceberg. The bob of Billy’s Adam’s apple looked like it hurt. He didn’t look at Steve. “I thought you knew that. You’re the one who kissed me.”

“I’m not—”

He cut himself off and turned away, looked out the window and prayed for a better way to say onslaught of emotion swelling in his chest.

“Not what?” Billy asked. His voice was iron, hardening on each word, a wall building itself between them. If Steve could, he would turn back time and say nothing at all.

“Gay, I think. I don’t...” Steve paused, eyes closing. He counted back from ten before speaking. “I don’t know. I never thought about it like that before.”

Silence filled the space between them. Steve hated it. He hated everything about that moment. Out of desperation, he looked at Billy.

His jaw was set, eyes distant even as he slashed a wary glance at Steve. There was tension there, the kind that made Billy look like a cobra in prey, coiling itself tight until it snapped at its victim. With the blood on his face, he looked like he was setting himself up for the kill.

Steve bit his lip until it hurt and Billy asked, “Is this you freaking out? Because I’ll take you apart if you take a swing at me, Steve. I’m not fucking around.”

He said nothing as he gnawed on his lip. He tasted blood. “Has that happened before?”

“You’re really ruining the mood.”

Steve looked away. They were inching closer to Billy’s trailer. “I’m not freaking out,” he said, not looking at him. “I just don’t know what you want from me.”

“What do you think I want?”

Steve scoffed. “That’s the point. *I don’t know.*”

“You could try telling me.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, leaning his temple against the window, “because you’re such a big talker.”

“You never acted like you cared,” Billy said, and it sounded so defensive Steve had to swallow down a laugh.

“I never acted like *I* cared?” he repeated, lifting his head away from the window. He stared at Billy. Billy stared out the windshield. “You think I invite just anyone to come into my house? You think I drive into the middle of fucking nowhere to sleep in just *anyone’s* bed? You

think I jerk off with all my friends?”

“You could,” Billy muttered, setting both hands on the steering wheel. His knuckles flexed against the leather. “I don’t fucking know, alright? Maybe you’re just having your little crisis and you wanna get it out of your system.”

“I can think of, like, ten other guys that this would be easier with.”

Billy’s lips peeled back from his teeth, canines exposed in a sneer. Steve wanted to reach out, touch his mouth, wipe the red smear from his lips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You beat the shit out of me.” When Billy said nothing, knuckles stretching white over the bone, Steve said, “You’re mean to your sister. And Lucas. And all of them. And you’re such a fucking asshole, you know that? I don’t get it. You’re not even *nice*.”

He scrubbed a palm over his face, eyes screwed shut. “You’re not even that good looking,” he muttered, petulant.

Billy said nothing. Steve peeked at him through his fingers.

Head falling forward, one fist balled and knuckles kissing his teeth, his shoulders shook with silent laughter. It spilled out from his fingers as his hand dropped. “*You’re not even good looking,*” he parroted, mocking, laughing as his words hit a note too high to be Steve’s. “Jesus, do you hear yourself?”

Steve deflated, shoulders slumping. He covered his mouth with his hand, like a dam to keep back all the stupid things he’d thought about Billy. *I think you’re beautiful and I feel safe with you and I want your dad to die for touching you.*

There were reasons—hundreds, thousands, millions—for why Billy was nothing to him, starting with that day in October and ending with Jane’s warning words. They haunted him at night, ghouls parsing his thoughts, picking at an old scab that just wouldn’t heal. He’d laid in bed for weeks and counted sheep and the thoughts of Billy.

Every slip of Nancy had disappeared, slithering away like smoke. Had

he really cared, in the end? He couldn't remember thinking about Nancy and Billy at the same time. There was only Billy, bright and impulsive and violent, keeping him up at night when the nightmares didn't itch at his mind, reminding him of all the things he wasn't supposed to want.

His shoulders twitched. It was funny, in a sort of backwards-fucked-to-the-sevens way, how fucked up Billy had made him without even trying.

Steve swallowed down the laughter, clearing his throat. His mouth twitched into a half-smile. "Maybe you have a point."

Billy laughed harder and then they were coming to a stop, in the middle of the main street with no one else around, and Billy was grabbing his jaw, and he winced when he did and Billy just chuckled again, deep, and they met in the middle, lips bumping together awkwardly until Billy tilted his head and they fitted together, two pieces of a puzzle.

It was as electric as the first, the frantic edge of desperation fizzled out but no less needy. He felt drugged, mind tilting, stupid on the press of Billy's mouth to his. It was heat and want, all the quiet thoughts Steve had had come to life.

It was chaste, no tongue and teeth, but it was enough to leave Steve dizzy when Billy pulled away, eyes soft.

"You think too much," he murmured, throaty, hand cradling Steve's chin like he was something delicate enough to deserve a gentle touch. "You want me? You got me. That's enough."

Steve licked his lips, eyes heavy. He leaned forward, letting his forehead rest against Billy's. "I want you," he whispered. "It scares the hell out of me."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No," he said. "Don't."

They stumbled in the door, Billy making a beeline for the portable

heater. It crackled to life with a pathetic rattle. Billy kicked it with his heel twice until it sputtered to a start.

Steve closed the door behind him, turning the deadbolt and flicking the nearest light on. Light filled up the room. When he turned to look at Billy, Billy was already looking at him, hands loose at his sides. Less feral, more human. He wasn't a delicate man, thick in the chest and waist and hips, a solid weight that could knock down the steadiest man, but from afar, bathed in yellow light, he looked vulnerable.

Steve tipped his chin up. "You got blood on your face."

Billy smiled. "You're one to talk."

"Is it bad?" Steve asked, rubbing his fingers along his cheek and down his jaw. His prickled with heat where the impact had landed, bright pain that lingered.

"It's pretty bad."

"I bet you look worse."

Billy moved, slow steps, and cocked his head toward the bathroom. "You should clean up."

Steve paused, tucking strands of fallen hair out of his eyes, and then said, feeling brave, "You should, too."

"Alright, *mom*."

"Billy," Steve deadpanned, dropping his hand. "I'm asking you to shower with me."

"Oh. *Oh*," Billy said, and broke into a grin, brighter than the lamp flickering light on them. He reached out to take Steve's hand like he couldn't help himself. "I can do that."

They made it to the bathroom without their shirts, stripped and chucked to the floor without care while Steve wrestled with the fly of Billy's jeans and Billy tried to keep them close, mouths pressed tight. He clutched at Steve's shoulder, laughing when Steve walked

backward into the doorframe with a grunt.

“Easy,” he chided softly, kissing to the corner of Steve’s mouth, pinning him back against the wall to trail his lips down Steve’s jaw.

Steve went easily, head tipping back against the wall, eyes closed. His hands stilled on Billy’s fly, fingers curled greedily around the shape of his cock, and Billy bit his shoulder. Pain bloomed under his skin and through his belly. He groaned.

“This isn’t the shower,” Steve gritted out as Billy kissed down his throat, tongue flicking across his Adam’s apple, a perfunctory scape of his teeth. Steve’s hands settled on Billy’s hips, slipping his thumbs underneath the waistband of his jeans.

“You’re not complaining,” Billy muttered, and then settled his open mouth against Steve’s neck, too high for his collar to hide, and sucked a mark into his skin.

Steve hissed, grabbing at Billy’s hips and arching against him. Their stomachs brushed and Billy pressed on Steve’s shoulder harder, a hint of teeth against the edges of the mark. Steve dug his thumbs into the dip of muscle trailing down beneath his jeans.

“I’m complaining now,” he said, licking his lower lip as Billy laved attention to the edge of the mark, the tip of his tongue tracing an inane pattern against his skin.

“Don’t whine.”

Steve laughed, soft, running his thumb down the length of Billy’s cock, trapped in heavy denim. “Take off your pants. I want to see you.”

Billy laid a last lingering kiss against the red mark on Steve’s neck, pulling away with a devilish tilt to his smile. Trailing his fingers down Steve’s chest, knuckles deliberately catching his nipple and tugging, he kissed him, slow and deep, tongue pressing in past Steve’s lips. He plucked at Steve’s fly, unzipping enough to fit his hand beneath. His fingertips smoothed through the thatch of hair, teasing the base of his cock.

Steve held back another laugh, hips pushing up into Billy's touch. "I'm not fucking around. You need me to do it for you?"

Billy didn't answer. Steve wedged his hands between them, pushing Billy back by the shoulders. He went easily, letting Steve direct him backward and through the door. They broke apart long enough to feel for the light switch and strip off their clothes.

Their elbows bumped as they moved, a low hum burning its way through Steve's blood. His fingers itched to touch Billy, to brace his hands across his skin and feel the heat of his body, to trace the ridges of his muscles, feel where the knotted scar tissue raised white from his skin.

It felt natural. It felt like being with girls, the easy want beating in time with the fear and desperation to touch. Being with Billy, stripping off awkwardly in his small bathroom and catching angles of his own flushed and bloody face in the mirror, felt safe.

He stepped back, kicking the tangle of his jeans and underwear to the side, and watched as Billy bent over, peeling his jeans off his thighs, bracing a hand on the wall to step out of them. Steve watched the smooth roll of skin over bone and muscle, the change of Billy's collarbone as he straightened and reached for Steve, fingers brushing down his arm.

"Take your socks off, man," he said, and Steve felt the fear swell, eyes dipping down to where Billy's cock thickened between his thighs. "Stop looking at my dick and get in the shower, Steve," he ordered when Steve had looked for too long to not be staring.

"Shut up," he said, biting his lip to hold back the twitch of a smile, bending over to peel his socks off. Billy did the same.

Billy pushed back the flimsy shower curtain and snatched a face cloth off the towel rack, stepping into the shower. Steve watched the flex of his thighs, his ass, the arch of his spine, and followed him like a siren call.

They shivered into the furthest corner as the plumbing rattled to life, icy pellets raining down on their calves for a steady two seconds

before Billy pushes Steve back against a wall and stifled a hiss against his mouth.

“I hate your shower,” Steve muttered, head tipping back enough to catch Billy’s upper lip between his teeth, giving it a soft bite.

Billy laughed, noses nudging as his arm circled around Steve’s waist and pulled him close, his hand resting on the small of his back. The water was lukewarm but Steve still shivered. Billy’s fingers dipped between his cheeks, sliding down, slow, eyes holding Steve immobile. Two fingertips touched Steve’s hole, furred and tense as Billy circled it.

Steve swallowed, swaying forward until he rested his weight on Billy’s chest. His hips twitched. Billy pressed against the rim, hinting entrance. His cock ached.

He’d let him. If Billy wanted to, Steve would let him.

It was a horrifying kind of realization, cutting him as deep as a blade, drawing lines through his belly as he curled his arms around Billy’s neck and pressed his mouth against his shoulder to smother a sob. It was visceral and raw, an open kind of wanting that felt like a wound that wouldn’t heal.

He’d let Billy, if he wanted to. He’d let Billy do anything.

The water burned, steam curling up around them. Touch gentle, Billy stroked his fingers over the sensitive skin, nudging hard enough that a hint became a threat. A thrill of want, twining itself with the fear, tiptoed its way up his spine, spreading out along his nerves until he could feel it in his teeth. The water burned, steam curling up around them. Shuffling under the spray, he rutted against Billy, the slick-slide-drag of water between his cock and the divot of Billy’s hip crowning the line of *not enough* and *too much*. Billy’s cock pressed hard and hot against his thigh.

He pushed up onto his toes, into Billy’s body, kissing his shoulder. Steve could hear the smile on his mouth as he spoke.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” he said, barely loud enough to be

heard over the shower, lips moving against Steve's ear. "Bet I could make you come with just a finger. Do you know how good it can be? It's like your whole body short circuits and you can't think or speak. You can't do anything but take it."

The thought of it fogged up his brain, thicker than the steam and the tension and the undiluted want between them. There had been porn rags and the occasional VHS pilfered from Tommy's brother's collection, sparking up his TV with the kind of things he wouldn't ask a girl for.

He could see it now—spread out on Billy's bed, the mismatched sheets pulled from the corners while Billy pressed his cock inside, legs tossed over Billy's shoulders, fixed in position while Billy eased in, until he bottomed out and Billy's thighs rasped against his ass, until Steve could feel him in his throat and was left twitching, mouth open and eyes closed.

Steve bit the spot he'd just kissed, nosing against the crook of Billy's neck with a wounded noise. "You can," he said, against Billy's skin, and then lifted his head and said louder, "You can. If you want. I'd let you."

I want you to, he didn't say.

A noise rumbled in Billy's throat and he cupped Steve's hip with his free hand, rutting up into Steve's hip, colliding with Steve's dick. The head rubbed along Steve's thigh as he pulled back, leading Steve deeper into the water.

Steve blinked water off his lashes, squeezed and rubbed at them until the world blurred back together. Billy cupped his cheek, washcloth appearing in the other. "Look up," he murmured, dabbing the cloth on his cheek, over his lip, wiping away the softening blood.

The water washed over Billy's face, until rivets of pink-tinged water slipped off his chin and down his collarbones. The red was gone from his teeth. The swelling had taken over, skin puffing up where the darkest blood lay and along the hollow of his left eye.

Steve reached up and touched his temple, slipped his fingers over the

delicate skin at the socket. Billy's nose twitched.

"Sorry," he whispered and did it again.

There was a sort of dopey-fond look in Billy's eyes while he cleaned off the evidence of the night from Steve's face. It was the kind of look reserved for Valentine's Day and romance movies, for when no one was looking. He'd seen it on Nancy's face, maybe, once, if she'd ever felt anything at all, but it lacked the possessive edge, the confident hand Billy used to touch him, gentle, even when he pressed on the edge of the swelling just to see the lightening-twitch of pain across his face.

Billy handed him the washcloth and reached for the shampoo, pouring it directly onto Steve's head, laughing as Steve shot him a baleful through the mop of his wet bangs. "You're an ass," he said.

He reached for Billy's thighs without thought, cradling the heavy weight of his balls in his palm, rolling them over his fingers, rubbing with intent with the pad of his thumb. The heat of his skin seared his hand, burning him to the bone as he closed his fingers around Billy's dick and stroked up in an easy slide.

Billy groaned, eyes half shut and hands stilling in Steve's hair. His cock twitched in his hand. Billy rocked up into his strokes, twisting on the balls of his feet as Steve tugged the foreskin back, thumb running circles over the head and edges his nail against the slit.

Hands carding Steve's hair back, pushing the soap from his eyes, Billy tipped his own back. Water ran in waterfalls over his skin, washing him clean. Stubborn blood and grime stuck to the busted skin. Steve tucked his thumb beneath the loose skin and felt heat and the dab of slickness, of water and Billy, and Billy groaned, fingers flexing in Steve's hair as his throat worked on unspoken words.

Steve bit his lip, eyes heavy, watching the bob of Billy's Adam's apple and the part of his lips as he swallowed down broken noises. He squeezed and stroked his cock, tracing the veins with a fingertip, trailing all the way down to the ridge of skin bisecting his sac, testing the tension as it tightened to his body.

He wiped the blood from Billy's face. Billy watched him through slitted eyes, hunting. Steve didn't feel like the sacrificial lamb. It felt good. Touching him felt good, and powerful, like he'd drunk from the holy well and been given the world.

Billy sucked in a sharp breath, hands tight in Steve's hair, and muttered, "You're gonna fucking kill me."

"I want to blow you," Steve said. He licked his lips, tongue dry. His heart thudded in his ears, a nervous flutter in his belly. His hand slowed and stilled between his words, cupping Billy's dick against his stomach. "I want you to come on my face."

Billy pulled on his hair. Steve made a pained noise, relaxing into the strain as Billy's mouth twitched into a hysterical smile, off-kilter, and then chuckled, breathy and soft, and stroked over the spot on his skull he'd pulled. "You're gonna fucking kill me," he repeated, and laughed again as he scrubbed a hand through Steve's hair.

They bumped into each other as they scrubbed away hair product and the club, the points of skin brushing gently, sharp, smooth. It was a glide between them aided by water. It felt better than anything Steve had felt before.

The scabs broke open on Billy's face and Steve dabbed at them with toilet paper, towel hung around his shoulders. Billy let him, big hands circling his hips, stroking over the dips and edges of his hipbones, circling around to settle in the crease where his thigh met the flesh of his ass. They wrung out their hair between kisses and Steve pushing Billy against the sink, leaving clothes on the floor, the towels hung haphazardly over the door and the light off as they stumbled to the bed.

Billy turned on the light before he settled on the bed, tugging Steve across his lap. They shuffled awkwardly, limbs tucked underneath body parts wrong, and settled into the bed. Billy sprawled at the head of the bed, legs spread and knees bent, Steve's hands curled around his thighs to tug him closer.

Steve bent and kissed the side of his knee, eyes closed as he trailed his lips the inside of Billy's thigh. The muscle jumped under his

tongue, Billy's hips shifting. Steve squeezed his thighs and he stilled.

He rested his cheek on Billy's thigh. Up close, his cock didn't seem as threatening. Thick enough it strained his fingers to try to close them, head wet with precome and peeking from the fold of his foreskin, and balls already drawn up to his body. Billy's eyes were heavy in him, thicker than the air in the Upside Down.

Lifting his head, he gripped the shaft, squeezing once, and nudged down the foreskin to expose the head. Tongue scalloped, he fed Billy's cock into his mouth, the ridge of the glans tucked just inside his lips. Skin and heat, a metallic tang where the slit slipped across his tongue.

Steve hummed, trying to swallow back the flood of saliva, and failed. It bled from the corners of his mouth and he made a noise, shifting on his knees. He braced a hand into the bed for support, tucked his teeth away and swallowed until he thought he would choke.

Billy's hands caught his hair, urging him up gently. "Easy, baby," he murmured. Steve glanced up, cock falling from his mouth to rest against his open lips. Billy wasn't looking at him, eyes on the ceiling. His chest rose steadily in sharp, short breaths, voice ragged. "Go easy. I don't give a fuck what you do. Just don't stop."

Feeling brave, he sucked the head back into his mouth, tongue curling and stroking, a moment of awkward rhythm as he circled his fingers tight around the length and stroked up to meet his fingers.

It was slow. Steve took his time, learning the shape with his tongue, until he could close his eyes and press the tipped point of his tongue under the head and Billy groaned and twisted beneath him. He bobbed his head, sucking in more of the length until he gagged, pulling off to cough spit onto Billy's dick and take him back down before he could breathe in a steady breath.

He pulled off with a wet, obscene noise to lick down to his balls. Billy tugged on his hair. "Don't fucking stop," he whined, hips shifting restlessly against the sheets. Dizzy, Steve sealed his lips around his cock again and Billy groaned, biting off, "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Billy's dick twitched, thighs trembling beneath him. Steve's jaw ached, warmth and salt and something slick dripping over the back of his tongue. He gasped as Billy wrenched his head back, quiet except for a quick inhale, eyes closing as come painted over the bridge of his nose and mouth.

Steve opened his eyes. Billy twitched through the last of his orgasm, body wrung tight with release. He licked over the head lying against his lips. He groaned and pushed at Steve, hand useless against his shoulder. Steve went willingly, shifting onto his knees and crawling up Billy's body.

His cock, pulsing with ache, brushed along the line of Billy's body. He groaned, cupping Billy's face, lips meeting in a harsh slant, spunk rubbing into Billy's skin. Billy grabbed him, rolled them over, fitting Steve inelegantly beneath him. Braced on a knee to give him room, he wedged a hand between them, breathing ruined breaths into the kiss as he gripped Steve's cock and stroked.

It was too much, too rough, too much friction and dancing on the edge of pain. Billy kissed him, wild and hard, lip splitting beneath the pressure and pouring fresh blood into Steve's mouth. He licked it off Billy's teeth and jerked into his touch, shoving a heel into the bed.

A band snapped, rushing over him in a hazing glory, white noise filling up his ears and head and eyes for a brief, blissful moment before it rained down on him. Sobbing a broken noise into Billy's mouth, raking his nails across his beautiful, freckled shoulders, he spilled over Billy's knuckles.

Trembling through it, he clutched at Billy, at his shoulders and his back, kissing into his mouth until he couldn't anymore. Exhausted, sated, he let Billy roll them over, face-to-face and on their sides, and wipe the come off his face and then Billy's knuckles.

"That's gross," Steve murmured, drowsy and stupid, orgasm-high and drunk on Billy touching him.

"You're gross," Billy said, childish, no heat. Steve cracked a wobbly grin and peeked at him through his lashes.

They tangled their legs together, pressed tight, cock echoing with pleasure-pain as it brushed along Billy's body. Billy threw an arm over his side, tracing a pattern along his spine.

"I didn't think you'd actually do it," Billy said after a long stretch of quiet.

"Do what?"

"Let me come on your face."

Steve huffed on a tired laugh, turning the hand curled between them to touch the base of Billy's throat. "I wanted you to."

"Yeah, I know. The enthusiastic sucking clued me in."

"Shut up." He shifted, getting comfortable against the curve of his body. "It felt good. I don't know. I trust you."

Billy's hand paused on his back. "I don't know why."

"Hey," Steve said, automatic, lightly flicking his throat to pull his attention from whatever thought had swept him away. It worked. "You want me, you got me. Remember?"

"Don't throw my shit back at me. It's not nice."

"I'm not nice."

"Nah," he said, and settled back into brushing lazy strokes over Steve's spine, down the subtle flare of his hips. "You're real nice."

Steve watched him, content with the silence, until Billy moved and grumbled about needing a cigarette. They switched position, Billy propped up by his abundance of flat pillows, Steve settled between his legs, chest to back. An ashtray sat next to them.

Billy kissed his shoulder and lit up a cigarette, passing it to Steve for a drag or two. His free hand sat on Steve's bare knee, Steve's fingers closed over it.

Leaning his head back against Billy's shoulder, he said, "I saw your

dad after it happened. Who called the cops?"

Billy let out a sigh, smoke billowing over Steve's shoulder. He sucked another drag off it and passed it to Steve. "I hit him. Once."

"With what?"

"A crowbar would have been nice. It was a lamp."

"He didn't look that fucked up."

"It was a small lamp."

Steve bit back a laugh and handed him the cigarette. "A crowbar would've done the trick."

"Yeah, maybe. A gun would've been good, too."

"You ever going to tell me what happened?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me." He paused. "If you don't want to talk about it, fine. But I'd like to know." *I want to know everything about you.*

Billy was silent for so long Steve felt the urge to break the silence, stilted clumsiness in the quiet. He sighed again and shifted, taking a quick pull off the cigarette and flicking off the ashes.

"I never hit him back before, y'know? Didn't seem like something I was allowed to do." He snorted. "Stupid, right? Real fucking stupid. I can break someone's skull off a sidewalk or fuck up your face but I can't hit my dad. It's like a rule somewhere or something that someone told me when I was a kid. It just didn't seem possible."

He was quiet again. Steve waited, patient, tracing the veins on the back of Billy's hand.

"I wasn't even doing anything," he said, and his fingers clenched on the cigarette until the filter distorted, permanently misshapen. "He never caught me. He just *knew*. He knew before I did. I didn't play with dolls and shit when I was a kid, so I don't know how, but he did."

He knew and he just...he just hated it. He hated me and whatever he saw in me. I think I was, like, six the first time it happened. I don't even know what for. He pushed me down the stairs, and then my mom told me it was an accident when we were in the hospital. I fell out of a tree, y'know? Stupid kid shit. It wasn't normal until it was."

He buried his nose in Steve's hair. Steve closed his eyes, swallowing the hurt in his throat. He lifted Billy's hand to his mouth and kissed his knuckles. Billy breathed a broken laugh into his scalp, raw and angry.

"I got picked up for being a stupid fuck. It's why we even moved here. I was drinking with some guys, being stupid, got busted. He just went nuclear and said we had to leave before anyone found out. And then he wouldn't even look at me until that fucking night." He swallowed, loud in Steve's ear. "Susan's golden girl goes missing and it's my fucking fault. I get my ass kicked by you, and then *her*, and then he chokes me fucking out when I'm trying to sleep."

Steve tensed. He closed his eyes, fingers tight around Billy's hand. Uneven words, careless and not enough, sat on his tongue. He gagged them by pressing his mouth to Billy's hand again, keeping it there.

"That night the cops came? I hit him. I was just so fucking *tired*," he gritted out, harsh, a bite in the air. Steve wanted to stoke his mouth, his tongue, like a balm. "So I hit him. And then he hit me. I hit him again. He called me a fag." He shrugged. "It just got worse. Max ran out of the house. I think she's the one who called the cops. They came, I left. You know the rest."

There was more than, unspoken words that Steve could parse out for himself. Hawkins was a small town, with few cops. The Chief had his fingers in everything, even if it was a domestic in the middle of the night.

"I think," Steve said, lowering Billy's hand from his mouth, "that's the most you've ever said."

Billy snorted, bemused, and bit the flesh of Steve's shoulder. He nuzzled against his skin, soothing it with a kiss. "Thanks."

“I didn’t know about...that night. Max never said.”

“Max doesn’t say a lot of shit.”

“I’m sorry.”

Billy kissed his shoulder again. “I don’t want your fucking pity,” he said, low, kinder than he possibly deserved.

“Okay,” Steve whispered, soft.

Falling silent as they lit up another cigarette and passed it back and forth until it was nothing but a stub, ground out in the ashtray, they settled into each other. A solid weight at his back, hand gentle as it traced hopeless patterns on his hip, Billy felt like peace. He had since the beginning, since the first night in the blizzard, crammed up against each other to share heat.

Billy set the ashtray on the ground and let Steve turn them over, curled up against his back, arm over Billy’s waist, knees spooned together. He nuzzled his hairline, kissing the cowlicked curls, and stroked Billy’s belly, dipping into his belly button just to feel the ticklish twitch.

“You never told me,” Billy said, when the moon had moved a notch in the sky. He paused and yawned, muffling the sound against the pillow. Drowsy, he said, “You never told me what she was doing there.”

He thought of it then, of the underbelly, the desolate valley of the Upside Down. It was easy, in these moments, where Billy didn’t know, to pretend it had never happened. It slipped from his mind. It disappeared without a trace, until it came creeping in, ready to lick at his fear.

No one talked about it. It was a rule. An unspoken, bullshit rule. The way the kids spoke about it, all revered wonder, didn’t touch the kind of panic that swelled in Steve’s chest when he thought of the cold, empty void that had pressed in on him, the fight-or-flight instinct that made him pick up a bat. Nancy and Jonathan didn’t talk about it that way. They spoke in their own language, one that Steve had

never been allowed to learn.

Joyce had asked him once if he was okay. He had cracked a grin and told a lie.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “You sure you want to hear it?”

He waited until Billy nodded. Eyes closed, he rested his forehead against Billy’s soft hair and spoke.

“You remember the dead girl?”

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, you can find me on Tumblr @ [celoica](#).

10. Chapter 10

Summary for the Chapter:

Standing in the middle of the cereal aisle, clutching a box of Rocky Road in one hand and C-3PO's in the other, Steve asked, "What are marshmallows made of?"

Billy snorted, nudging Steve with his shoulder as he reached past him, knocking Steve's hand. "It's all crap," he said, plucking a box of fucking All-Bran off the shelf and dropping it in the cart.

Steve gave the All-Bran a skeptical glance and said, "Like I trust your taste."

"You're gonna get fat."

"No, I'm not."

"Fat," Billy said, pushing the cart down the aisle. He grinned over his shoulder. "And bald."

He shoved the boxes back onto the shelf and followed after Billy. "That's probably the meanest thing you've ever said to me."

He woke to the gurgle of an ancient coffee maker and wrapped up in Billy's scent.

Steve groaned, face buried in the pillow, a distinct damp circle where his mouth pressed against the fabric. His skin ached, hot and bright pain, where it pressed into the pillow. His sleep-addled mind worked slowly, piecing the night together. Billy's bed, his hands and mouth, the sound of his laughter—the taste of his spunk on Steve's tongue, the slaughtered look in his eye when Steve had shimmied up to kiss him.

The hollow words, Neil's anger, the scars Steve had traced with his tongue and lips and fingers. Retelling the night at the Byers. The way

Billy had tensed under his touch.

The awkward quiet they'd drifted into, with Steve's arm wrapped around Billy's waist, holding him close, waiting for the moment he pushed him away. They hadn't fallen asleep so much as trailed off into it, the alcohol and adrenaline coming down harder on him than he'd expected. One moment he'd had his nose buried against Billy's neck, breathing him in, and the next he was waking up alone.

He rolled onto his back, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His vision blurred, brown and blue swirling together, and he when he blinked the world back into its place, Billy was standing in the doorway, naked, holding two mugs with an expression on his face that Steve had never seen before.

When Billy said nothing, he sat up. The sheets slipped around his waist. Stripped down to nothing, he felt like an exposed nerve.

"You look like you got hit by a train," Billy said finally as he stepped into the room. His face was a mess—bruised and busted, lip swollen on one side, the sullen shadow of a sickly bruise beneath his eye. A patchwork of injuries.

Billy settled himself on the bed, unconsciously naked, and one mug next to Steve on the battered side table. Sunlight glowed behind the drawn curtains, mid-morning yellow. There were bruises and scuffs across Billy's body, a collection Steve hadn't noticed the night before.

Because he'd been too busy, too handsy, too desperate to crawl as deeply inside Billy as Billy was inside him. He'd been desperate to touch him, to get *intimate*. The kind of intimacy he'd nursed with Nancy, the kind of desire to be understood and close and that aching little word that he'd always pretended he was better than. It had been raw and real, to want so much he'd felt like a monster.

He swallowed, pinned by the look in Billy's eyes. "Do you think I'm crazy?" he asked, and then regretted it immediately.

Billy raised his eyebrows. "I dunno. *Are* you crazy?"

"No."

“Coulda fooled me last night.”

“So you don’t believe me.” Gutted, it felt like a punch to the face.

Billy took a sip from his mug. “It was pretty fucked up.”

“So’s your life,” he muttered. He took his own mug. It was too light on cream, a tad too sweet, entirely too hot, but he still drank it down like there were answers to be found in the grounds at the bottom.

Billy laughed. “You got jokes, so you’re not that insane.”

Tongue burning and eyes closed, he drank deeply. His lips stung. He could practically feel the skin peeling on the roof of his mouth. It was a distraction, and one that was cut short as Billy laid a hand on his wrist.

“Don’t *drown* yourself in it.”

He pulled the mug away, ashamed. His hand shook as he set it on the rickety side table. “Don’t—”

“I believe you, dumbass. Jesus,” Billy swore, cup set beside Steve’s, shifting on the bed until he faced Steve. There was a scar, circular and white, just below his left nipple. It looked old. Steve wanted to touch it. “Or something. I don’t know. I believe you told me what you think is the truth. It’s pretty fucked up and like something out of a Stephen King book.”

Steve swallowed and stared. He counted back from five and, when Billy didn’t answer right away, opened his mouth to say something his brain hadn’t decided on.

“Shut up.” Billy cut him off and scooted closer. He braced a hand on Steve’s thigh. It felt less like a comfort and more like a thumbtack to hold him still. “I’m not done talking. You can say whatever the hell you want when I’m done talking.”

Pinned, held and caught, Steve nodded dumbly.

“You believed me about my dad,” he said, loud, sharp. He sighed through his nose, voice dropping low. The words rasped in his throat,

sandpaper over grit. “So I’ll believe you about this.”

His face still hurt. It ached. Something in his stomach slithered tighter into a knot. He stared, waited, and blinked when Billy’s face twisted into anger, snapping an impatient, “*Well ?*”

“Oh, you’re done now?” Steve asked, light.

“Yeah, I’m fucking done now. Say something.”

There were a million things to say. His tongue was lead in his mouth, head thick with too many thoughts that did nothing but leave him confused. If Billy were a girl, this would be easy. It would be easy like waking up in the morning used to be easy. It would be easy because he’d know what he was supposed to do.

They didn’t make movies about this kind of thing. Not ones that Steve had seen or heard of. There were no books he knew that were written about kissing boys—men—and about wanting to mark their necks so everyone knew. If Steve could think of a time when it had been mentioned, it had been at Christmas dinner when his Aunt Sylvia had waved her hand with a grimace and say *those people* while his dad had scotch after his nightly beer and his mom had nodded her head knowingly.

There wasn’t a manual or textbook. There wasn’t even porn he’d seen to use as a compass.

Are we dating sounded stupid in his own head. He’d dated Nancy and Laurie. He’d fucked around with Amy and Becky, and Carol that one summer Tommy and her had broken up. Dating was reserved for girls who’d held out long enough for him to actually get to know them. Dating was reserved for girls, period.

Billy wasn’t a girl. That made it harder. That made it impossible.

So, instead, Steve said, “Do you know what it’s like playing hide-and-go-seek with a psychic? You can never win.”

Billy frowned. Steve went on. “Her powers—it’s a lot, y’know? You read about it, and you see stuff like this in the movies, but it’s not real life. She is. But she’s a kid, so she wants to play games and watch

TV and do all the junk I outgrew when I was, like, nine. We do this thing where we all go into the woods and she's it. She can find you in five minutes.

"But that's not the worst part. You can't keep a secret from someone who can get inside your head."

Billy settled himself cross legged on the bed. Steve tried not to stare at his dick. "What's she know?"

"She said you want to be my friend."

Billy made a sour face, lip peeling up in the pantomime of a snarl. "Is that so."

"You said we were friends."

"I don't want the town nut job knowing that."

Steve sighed through his nose. "She's not crazy."

"I still don't want her knowing."

"Well," he said, short, "too bad."

"Does Max?"

It sounded like a threat. Steve swallowed. "I don't think so. I don't know."

"Which is it?" Billy's eyes were hard, sharp, hawk-like intensity burrowing into Steve's face.

"I don't know. I haven't seen her much lately."

"Thought you two were friendly."

"She's a kid, Billy."

When Billy smiled this time, it wasn't nice. It was all teeth. "A little birdie told me you like kids."

It felt like a hundred years had passed since Steve had found him in

his car. Longer, still, somehow since he had let Billy into his home, chased after him in the cold, slept next to him in the dark. It had felt wrong then, but he'd wanted to be *better* than before. He'd wanted to be a better man, so he'd let Billy stay, cracked himself open to let Billy in through the cracks.

Steve closed his eyes, licked his lips, counted back from five. "What do you want me to say?"

"That you care about me more than her."

Steve opened his eyes. He frowned. "What?"

Still smiling, Billy's hand tightened on his thigh. His hand was rough, thumb calloused, branding heat into Steve's skin. A knot twisted in his belly. "Say it."

"Why?" His voice came out in a croak.

The smile slipped from Billy's face as his hand skimmed up Steve's thigh, dipping down, inching closer to his dick. Heat and shame and fear wove through him.

"Because it's true," Billy said, low and hot. A shiver licked up Steve's spine. "I want to hear it from your mouth."

It was a promise and a threat, like everything else that came out of Billy's mouth. It was insanity—the whole situation. In Billy's bed, bruised and naked and still wanting. Maybe he really was an addict.

"She's just a kid," he said again, like that explained anything. Like they weren't all kids. Like Billy wasn't just a kid.

Billy's hand stilled. "Are you trying to tell me something, Steve?"

Steve bit his tongue. "You know I care."

"So say it."

"Why's it matter so much?" he murmured, eyes closed. Looking at Billy was too much. His eyes bore holes into his skull, unspooling his brain and the chaotic thoughts.

Billy's fingers caught on the edge of the sheet, tugging it down to bare Steve's skin. He slipped his hand beneath, palm hot and rough and burning him through where it settled back on his thigh. Steve's dick twitched, interested.

Instead of answering, Billy ran his knuckles over the shaft, catching the head between thumb and forefinger, stroking over the sensitive tip. It thickened under his touch, blood rushing in Steve's ears and down to his groin. He bit back a groan—bit his tongue until he tasted pain—and canted his hips up. His cheeks burned with the want and the hurt, shame ebbing away to a white buzz in his head.

Billy moved closer, coffee and morning breath forgotten. He pulled the sheet off Steve's body, grabbed him by the hip and yanked him down on the bed. Steve fell back, graceless, letting out a startled noise as Billy covered him. Situating himself between Steve's thighs, hand curled loosely around his cock, he bent down to kiss him.

Billy kissed like a bruise, like he was trying to spread out something dark over Steve's mouth. He touched like possession, like he could own a person.

It burned all the way down to his core. Steve groaned, twisting beneath Billy, hands scrambling up Billy's sides until he came to grip his shoulders. He hitched his thighs around Billy's, locked his ankles at the small of his back and pulled him down, pulled him closer, gasped into his mouth and twisted his nails into Billy's skin while Billy stroked his dick, petted over his balls, pressed his fingers against the stretch of skin behind them.

There was something important he needed to say. Something vital. Something that he couldn't remember. A plume of smoke fogged up his brain, made everything electric to the touch and everything that wasn't Billy's hips grinding into his so distant he didn't care.

There was a savage edge to the way Billy touched him. His teeth pressed against his lips and his nails scoured marks into his thigh as Billy yanked it up higher, stretched the delicate muscle until it ached with brute force. Steve went easily, slipped down to the rough sheets, wrapped himself around Billy as he rocked his hips up, cock against cock.

The air thickened around them, hot and humid. Billy tasted like black coffee, the sharp tang of morning and the burn of need. He clutched and gripped and pulled, rutted against him like a wild thing, bound by base desire.

Billy made a noise against his mouth, wet as he pulled away. Steve tried to follow, an aborted whine in his throat. Billy pushed him down with a particular grind-twist-shove of his hips. He fell back against the bed, swallowing.

“What?” he asked, breathless. His heart heaved in his chest.

Cheeks flushed and eyes dark, Billy looked like everything out of his dirtiest fantasies. He ran his fingers through Steve’s hair, pushed it off his forehead with a gentle touch. “Say it,” he said, voice thick.

Steve blinked, brain stuttering to process. Lust-stupid, mind crawling toward understanding at a snail’s pace, he stared and tried to catch his breath.

“Oh,” he whispered, the twist of shame-desire stabbing in his belly. His hips twitched up, searching for friction, and Billy held him down against the bed with a hand on his hip.

Steve cupped his face, kissed his lips and chin and jaw, ran his nose against the skin next to Billy’s ear. Billy let him. He kissed his neck, let his tongue touch his skin to taste sleep-clean skin and the whatever part of Billy that made him taste like heaven.

Fingers spasming on Steve’s hip, Billy made a noise in his throat, soft, questioning. Steve bit his tongue and wedged a hand between them, indelicate as he grasped the base of Billy’s cock, wriggling to rearrange them until Billy pulled away and Steve pressed his cock down, between the cheeks of his ass. The wet cockhead dragged against his skin, pressed snug against his hole. Steve held him there.

Billy froze.

He swallowed around the flood of saliva in his mouth. “I want you to,” he said, like that explained it all, like that was enough.

He could see it in his head, a filthy-good film reel playing behind his

eyes. It was possession, being taken, wanting to have every part of Billy inside him. In theory, he knew there was more, that it would hurt and there were parts he was missing, but he wanted it. Every frantic, enthusiastic fuck he'd had with girls, every time he had pressed Nancy beneath him and made love to her—he wanted it all with Billy, and then some.

It was enough for Billy. He kissed Steve, hard, pressed him down against the bed and took his cock in hand, jerked him off in time to the grind of his hips, the slide of his own dick against Steve's ass.

They came like that, rubbing off against each other, breathing harshly into each other's mouths. Billy slipped his fingers between Steve's cheeks, pressed against the hole, fingers slick with spunk, until Steve shuddered, caught between pushing him away and pulling him closer.

"Jesus, Steve," Billy whispered, thready, and kissed the slope of his nose, over the bow of his lips. His fingertip nudged against Steve's rim, feeling the clench and flutter of muscle, until he pressed into the first knuckle.

Steve dropped his head against the pillow, inhaling sharply. It was too much, solid and invasive, and he held himself still until his body relaxed. He thought, for a moment, Billy would push deeper, spread him open with fingers and his own come, but he pulled out, wiped his hand off on the sheets and laughed, deep and throaty.

"You're fucking insane, man," he said, fond, and kissed the space between Steve's eyebrows. Rolling off, he settled beside him on the bed.

"So you don't want to?" Steve asked when he found his voice again.

Billy flashed him a smile, brilliant and white. "Oh, I'm going to. I don't think you know what you're asking for."

Shooting him a scowl, he muttered, "I know what I'm asking for."

"How many dicks have you had up your ass?"

Steve bit back a flush of embarrassment. "None."

“Exactly.”

“You’re not exactly putting me in the mood to let you,” he grumbled.

Rolling onto his side, Billy slung his arm over Steve, nose brushing against his shoulder. “Don’t be a bitch,” Billy whispered, and kissed the patch of skin his nose had touched. He looked up at Steve through his eyelashes. “I’ll fuck you when you’re good and ready.”

Steve snorted, fisting a hand in Billy’s hair and yanking up. Billy rolled on top of him, laughing, and kissed him.

Standing in the middle of the cereal aisle, clutching a box of Rocky Road in one hand and C-3PO’s in the other, Steve asked, “What are marshmallows made of?”

Billy snorted, nudging Steve with his shoulder as he reached past him, knocking Steve’s hand. “It’s all crap,” he said, plucking a box of fucking *All-Bran* off the shelf and dropping it in the cart.

Steve gave the All-Bran a skeptical glance and said, “Like I trust your taste.”

“You’re gonna get fat.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Fat,” Billy said, pushing the cart down the aisle. He grinned over his shoulder. “And bald.”

He shoved the boxes back onto the shelf and followed after Billy. “That’s probably the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

Billy stopped abruptly. Steve faltered, stepping around him. Between the canned soup and instant rice, Billy looked up and down the aisle before leaning over, mouth bumping against Steve’s before settling there. It was solid and warm, a soft ache in the bruise on his chin, and lasted fleeting seconds.

Steve missed the warmth the moment Billy straightened and patted his shoulder, eyes crinkled in the corners with joy. “You’ll be fat and

bald and Midwestern old.”

“Is that different than South Coast old?”

“Yeah,” Billy said. He pushed the cart along. “I’ll always be cooler.”

They picked their way through the store, suspiciously empty for a Saturday at three in the afternoon. After hours spent lounging in bed, fixed between Billy’s thighs with his mouth on Billy’s dick twice more just to learn what made him tick, they’d stumbled their way to the kitchen for coffee and to hunt for food in the mostly-empty fridge.

Then they’d stumbled into clean clothes, into Billy’s Camaro and into town. Steve had traded one bloody shirt for another. The red button-up Billy had worn last Halloween, a stain on the inside of the collar and edge of the left sleeve. It hung off him, loose, Billy’s leather jacket keeping it from billowing in the brisk afternoon breeze.

It should freak him out. It should be *weird* and unconventional and peculiar and every other word Nancy called Jane when she did something particularly fucked up. It wasn’t, in the way that breathing was weird.

It was right. Being with Billy felt right. It should freak Steve the fuck out, but it didn’t.

“Hey.”

Steve blinked, turned, and caught the red apple aimed at his throat before it knocked the wind from him. Steve turned it over in his hand and gave Billy a look. Billy smiled, bracing his palms against the cart and rolling it back and forth.

Steve set the apple in the cart. “What?”

“I asked you if you wanted red or purple onions, like, five times.”

He cleared his throat. “I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“Stuff.”

“It’s almost like you’re trying to ignore me.”

“You’re just...” He trailed off and made a vague gesture with his hand between Billy and himself. “You know. Us. Whatever. I didn’t think we’d ever end up here.”

The turn of old cart wheels creaked behind them. Old Lady Milton ambled by them, casting suspicious looks at them both.

Billy gave her back the bird as he said, “Yeah? I knew we would.”

Steve waited until she was gone before answering. “You didn’t.” He looked back at Billy and frowned. “You’re full of shit.”

“I’m not.”

“You always beat the shit out of your friends?”

“Are we?” Billy asked, arms folded and resting on the handle of the cart. “Thought we had a whole different word for what we are, but I guess I was mistaken.”

He stared at his mouth and eyes, took in the slight quirk of his eyebrow. He scowled. “Why are you being like that?”

“You’re the one freaking out.”

“Is this gonna be part of every conversation we have? You do and say something nice, I think for a second it’s going to stick and then you go off and ask if I’m going to *freak out*?”

Billy snorted, tossed the too-long curls from his eyes. He’d slicked it down with water before they’d left, but the cotton-induced frizz had dried into shape again. “Because it’s going to happen sooner or later.”

Steve sighed and stepped passed him. “If I was gonna freak out, it’d already have happened.”

Billy gave him a look like he didn’t believe him.

“Listen, I suck—” he started, loud, aggravated until he realized he was standing in one of the only grocery stores in Hawkins, where the

thousands of residents tended to spend some of their precious weekend.

He huffed, voice quieting, a whisper as he glanced back at Billy. “I sucked your dick, okay? Three times. I let you jerk off on my face because it was really fucking hot and it turned me on. I swallowed, too. Okay? And I didn’t freak out. I’m not going to freak out.”

Heat crept up his neck, a flush on his cheeks. The shit-eating grin on Billy’s face only made it worse.

“Billy,” he said, heated, as Billy raised a hand and waved over Steve’s shoulder and asked, succinct, “Do you two fuckers need something?”

Jonathan and Nancy stood at the end of the aisle, clutching soda and chips, wide-eyed.

Steve felt the blood drain from his face, hyper-aware of the bruise on his face and Billy’s shirt buttoned to his throat.

“Steve,” Nancy said, shoving her chips into Jonathan’s arms. Jonathan followed her down the aisle, lumbering forward like Frankenstein’s monster.

Steve glanced down at the cart, filled with more vegetables than he had eaten in the past month, and then to Billy, who wasn’t looking at him at all. Calm, with that stupid grin on his face.

He swallowed, wondering if they heard him. Nancy looked at him like a stranger, like a specimen pinned to a table that she could dissect with her eyes. Like she *knew*. Like she knew that Steve had kissed Billy Hargrove, let himself fall apart under his touch, kissed a hickey into the delicate, pale skin of his inner thigh because Billy had said harder and Steve had wanted to give him everything.

“Steve,” she said again, wary, looking between him and Billy.

Jonathan said, “Man, are you okay?”

Nancy took a step forward, and then another, until she was toe-to-toe with him.

“Back it up, princess,” Billy said as he dropped a hand on Steve’s shoulder, fingers curled in possession.

It grounded Steve, brought him back to reality, where he was standing in the middle of a grocery store, bruised and wearing Billy’s clothes, in front of Nancy and fucking *Jonathan*.

He cleared his throat and shrugged off Billy’s hand. “Hey,” he said, aiming for casual. By the look on Jonathan’s face, he missed by miles.

Nancy scowled at Billy. “No one asked you.”

Steve wanted the earth to crack open, for him to slip underneath and be swallowed whole. If another Gate could manifest beneath his feet, he would be thrilled, would fall to his knees and worship the Mind Flayer like a god.

Billy raised his eyebrows. “Asked me what?”

“For anything.”

Jonathan took a step forward, hands still overflowing with chips and soda. “No one was talking to you, Billy.”

“You’re talking to me right now.”

Steve closed his eyes, counted back from ten and wondered if it was too late to throw himself into the abyss.

“Billy,” he said, and Nancy looked at him like she knew something no one did. It made him feel bare, stripped, naked. He swallowed and said, “Don’t be a dick.”

When Jonathan frowned, mouth pursed, he looked at Nancy and said, “Don’t be a bitch, Nancy.”

Beside him, Billy vibrated. He could feel it all the way down to his toes. Joy, the crystal-clear kind that ate through everything else like acid. Triumph.

Billy did always like winning.

“Steve—“

“What?”

She bit her lip, looked up at him with those big doe eyes. “I’m worried. We tried your place last night and you weren’t there, and now you’re here with *him* —“

“Hey,” Billy said, sounding pleased with himself.

“Jonathan, reign in your girl,” Steve said over Nancy’s head. “Billy, let’s go.”

“Hey—!”

“What?” Steve snapped, pivoting on his heel to glare at Nancy. He felt worse than he did on the come down after the first fight with Billy. He felt worse than he had in days. “What do you want, Nance? We’re not friends, remember? I haven’t fucking called for a reason. I’m not interested.”

She looked as stunned as she had when she’d hit him. He felt as bad as he did then, too.

Jonathan shoved his handful of groceries onto the nearest empty shelf and said, “I will fuck your face up again if you don’t cut it out.”

Billy moved, smiling all the way as he settled himself in front of Jonathan, chest-to-chest. Billy had enough muscle on him to overshadow Jonathan, to be a threat with just his body. Jonathan didn’t back down, eyes narrowing, mouth opening to say something no doubt incredibly stupid.

It was as foreign as the Upside Down. It felt like he was on the ceiling and looking down at the picture, of Billy with that devious little smile that was so disarming it left his mouth dry. It was never a good smile. It was dead behind the eyes.

“Billy,” he said, for what felt like the millionth time, reaching for his arm. His fingers snagged on the fabric of his jacket. Steve plucked at it, pulled at it, tried to draw him back.

Jonathan's eyes narrowed. "Back off."

"Or what?"

Nancy grimaced and reaches for Jonathan. "Jonathan, stop—"

Steve shook Billy's arm. "C'mon, man, don't do this—"

Jonathan didn't move. Steve clenched Billy's jacket in his hand. Billy just smiled, too bright to be good, a manic edge to his mouth.

"*Or what ?*" Billy repeated. Nancy looked between Steve and Billy, frantic as she tried to pull him away, tug him somewhere safe and not the middle of every housewife's Saturday afternoon destination.

"Billy!" Steve hissed, jerking on his arm, grabbing at muscle under denim. "Fucking *stop*. This isn't the place."

It didn't seem to register. He stood there, smiling, looking insane and fucked up, toe-to-toe with Jonathan. Steve held his breath, dug his fingers into Billy's arm and waited.

Jonathan relented when Nancy wedged herself between them, hands on Jonathan's shoulder to push him back. Billy didn't give an inch. He smiled, amused, as dangerously joyful as before. Steve held on tighter, tongue dry.

"Don't be an idiot," she said to Jonathan, tossing her hair over one shoulder to shoot a pointed glare at them both, eyes venom and shaped like mousetraps. It stung Steve, harder than the throb of his fingers clenched too tight.

"He's not worth it," Nancy said, and cast a meaningful look at Steve.

Steve clutched at Billy, pulled him back with a half-hearted tug he expected to be met with resistance. Billy went easily. He took a step back, and then another, and then he was standing behind Steve and Steve was letting go of his arm and Billy was standing so close to him he could feel breath on his neck.

Steve held his breath and closed his eyes. Jonathan's confusion and Nancy's concern burned in his brain, mixed up with the fucked up

courtship of wanting for months.

Uncomfortable seconds ticked away. No one spoke. Steve swallowed and opened his eyes.

Disgust took over her face, mouth twisted. He wondered if she knew, or if his defense of Billy was enough to make her hate him.

Jonathan looped his arm over Nancy's shoulder and pulled her away, shooting his own look of disgust—betrayal—at them both. Steve felt Billy sway forward and brush against his back. It was ugly in an exposing way. It was worse than a kiss, than a bite mark on his throat or Billy pissing on him like a dog did a fire hydrant.

He'd spent months doing it to Nancy, kissing her neck and whispering in her ear.

They pivoted, Nancy's arm slung low on Jonathan's back. Halfway to the end of the aisle, Billy spoke against his ear, loud enough to carry in the air.

"You guys should be careful. I heard there's something scary in the trees."

Steve moved quickly, turning on his heel and shoving at Billy's chest. Billy took a step back and smiled over Steve's shoulder. His teeth said *I win* . He didn't look at Steve.

Behind him, Nancy said, "What the hell, Steve!"

"You fucking *told him*— "

"Okay!" Steve snapped, loud, pushing at Billy until he walked backward into the shopping cart. His chest fluttered under Steve's palms as he laughed. "Okay, whatever, I'll talk to you later."

"Steve— "

"*Later* !" He clenched his fingers in Billy's shoulder, eyes screwed shut like he could block out the whole world. "Later," he said again, speaking over his shoulder. He didn't want to look at them, see them look into him, see what he looked like when Billy was too close.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, huh, Steve?" Jonathan asked. Steve didn't have to look to know the way his lip had curled in disgust. He could hear it.

It was too valid of a question to answer, so Steve didn't. He pushed at Billy again and dropped his hands, grabbed the edge of the cart to pull it forward. He wanted out, back at the trailer, somewhere that wasn't where his friends could see him betray them right in front of their eyes.

Nancy said his name again, harsh anger, while Jonathan said, "Let's just go, Nancy. He's not going to listen."

He ignored them and pushed the cart, prayed to God and king and country that Billy wouldn't say anything further. His hands shook on the handle of the cart by the time he made it to the checkout line, brain a blissful buzz of white noise. On autopilot, he didn't realize Billy was standing next to him, hand brushing along the inside of his arm to catch his attention.

"I'll be in the car," he said as Steve turned to look at him.

Billy took his hand, crammed a few bills into his palm and headed out the door. Steve watched him go, dumb, until the checkout girl cleared her throat and said, "Are you paying?"

He paid with his own money, wadded up bills jammed into his back pocket. He carried the bags to the car.

Billy stood outside, leaning against the car, cigarette between his lips. Steve stopped in front of him, tongue dry with words he couldn't form.

Why are you such an asshole and why are you making this hard for me circled his head. The worst part of it was he knew the answer already: Billy was Billy. It was how he was.

Billy looked at him, expectant, eyebrows raised like he was waiting for the fireworks to start.

Steve looked at him, expectant, waiting for an apology he knew wasn't coming.

He sighed and set the bags on the car, ignoring the soft *hey* of protest.

“Shut up,” he said. He plucked the cigarette from Billy’s mouth, pulled a drag and looked up the sky.

Billy laughed. “That’s all you gotta say?”

“Do you want a fight?”

“Not really.”

“Stop trying to start one.”

“You think that’s what I’m doing?”

“I think,” Steve said, rubbing his knuckles over his chin, glancing at Billy, “you’re pissing on me like a fire hydrant.”

Billy flicked his tongue like he was tasting the air, testing it. Like a snake, like Steve was prey. “You make a lot of assumptions.”

“I’m not with Nancy.”

“You love her.”

“Who told you that?”

“Tommy.”

Steve snorted. “You always listen to Tommy?”

“Only when he’s obviously right.”

“So, what?” Steve asked, handing the cigarette back to him. Billy rolled it between his fingers before setting it to his mouth.

“So, you love her.”

“Love-*d*. I loved her.”

Billy shrugged and looked passed Steve’s shoulder. Steve scowled, grabbing his chin and turning Billy’s face to look at him.

“Just stop—“ he started, biting off his words with a huff. He lowered his voice. “I’m with you. You know that, right?”

Billy’s eyes narrowed. He said nothing. Steve sighed.

“You’re infuriating, and you start fights for no reason, and half the time I think you don’t even like me, but I’m with you.” He swallowed, hand locked against Billy’s skin. Heat prickled over his spine, hyper-aware of the cars pulling into the parking lot, of the people hanging around.

He dropped his hand like it burned and stepped away. Billy caught the front of his shirt, holding him in place.

“Sometimes,” Billy said, low, “I think you’d let me kiss you in front of everyone.”

Stomach twisted into knots, Steve said, “I would.”

They dug out a makeshift pit next to the lake and started a fire. Billy kept a stockpile of dry logs under the trailer, and enough spare fuel to be questionable, and Steve was left in charge of making hot chocolate topped with Irish cream while Billy made dinner.

“You can’t fucking cook and you have delicate hands,” he’d said as he banished Steve to the living room.

They ate inside and drank outside, dusting off the old lawn chairs, seating them side by side. The fire roared and crackled, giving off enough heat to warm Steve down to the bones.

“When are you leaving?” Steve asked.

Billy frowned. “Leaving?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“When we were in bed. Before,” he added, with a vague flustered gesture, like time was marked by Before Dick Sucking and After Dick

Sucking. “About California.”

“Oh,” Billy said, and slumped in the chair. He shrugged. “Maybe June. July, probably.”

“Why?”

“Why July?”

“You could leave now.”

Billy shrugged again, took a sip of his drink and said, “I could’ve left a long time ago.”

“Then do it,” Steve said. “There’s nothing here, man. Not unless you want to make it big as a used car salesman.”

Billy’s mouth twitched, a semi-smile. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

Steve bit his lip, slumped in his own chair, and held his mug up in a mocking toast. “To Harrington and Associates.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” he said. He swallowed the last of his drink and set his mug onto the ground. “I thought you were going to ask, back then.”

“I was.”

Steve paused, looking at Billy. “Is that why you’re waiting until July?”

Billy smiled, soft, fond, orange light flickering across his face. “I was gonna show up. Tell you to pack a bag. I was hoping you’d say yes.”

The words were out of his mouth before he could think about them.

“I will.” He licked his lips and said, “We’ll leave after graduation. I’ll go with you.”

Notes for the Chapter:

As always, you can find me on Tumblr @ [celoica](#).